IRONY

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AN HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION

BY

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The glory, jest and riddle of the world

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DEDICATION

My dear Gilbert Murray,

Long dedications are somewhat out of fashion, perhaps deservedly, and a vanishing form of courtesy is apt to be held no courtesy at all. You will not take that view, but you may reasonably wonder why I am not content with the simple preposition before your name. It is because I cannot refrain from saying that, while the dedication to you of any book of mine would be, I hope, appropriate, the present volume in a special manner belongs to you. Not merely because it is much concerned with your subject, but for a deeper reason. The poet may write entirely to himself; the scholar can hardly do that, his function being so largely interpretative. I imagine that every writer engaged in a task like mine has someone more or less clearly present to his mind whom he seeks to persuade. I had you.

For one thing I could be sure that, whether you agreed or not, you would understand. Science differs from literature in this, that in science agreement is everything, in literature nothing at all. Scholarship (which lies between them) is advanced by the friendly disputes of scholars. You and I, it is true, have not often disagreed; yet I believe we have always been ready to disagree, if the argument so guided us. Because this is so, I like to think that our large agreement has been founded on a truth underlying our intellectual sympathy in dealing with that old Hellenic world which, if one cannot touch with some imaginative understanding, one had better not touch at all. So thinking or hoping, to whom could I dedicate Irony but to you, who more than most of us have seemed to realize in yourself the scholar's dream that the ancient wisdom is somehow made more living by his thought, and lovelier, it may be, by his love?

April 1926.

IRONY

I

a

IRONY, which is a criticism of life, is as hard to define as poetry. On the other hand, it is perhaps no harder to recognize. I hold it therefore the wiser course to treat it as one treats poetry, content in the main to know it when one meets it. Yet the critic, if he is to justify his business, must analyse his contentment, must interpret what he knows. This I have sought to do. But I confess I have done it as little as possible. I have constantly tried to tell the thing which happened rather than that which might or should have happened, to deal with the concrete instance rather than with theories. In spite of this the subjective element will come in ; the ego, conscious or unconscious, will see to that. To think of repressing it altogether is stupid, and would make a stupid book. But what we want, I think, is a history of Irony as objective as one can reasonably make it. I may say that what I am offering now is an introduction to such a history.

b

For of course Irony has a history. The Ironical Man is made as well as born, and the speech he uses to-day—it is of Irony in literature that I am writing—

is moulded and coloured by the Ironical tradition. That gives the scholar his opportunity and perhaps, in this case, his advantage over the philosopher. For if we cannot tell what Irony is, we can tell by what gradations it has become what it is.

The study of this process leads the student to the Greeks, with whom Irony may be said to have begun ; who at least perfected it and used it in so many ways as to illustrate it all but completely. You may fairly call it a Greek thing ; from an important point of view the most differentiating thing about the Greek spirit. The student finds that not only the literature of the Hellenes but their whole attitude to life is touched with Irony. This may turn out to be in some measure the secret of that power and charm, so haunting and so permanent, which Greece still exercises on the minds that once have felt them. We hear much of Greek plainness and Greek simplicity. Let us not forget that these virtues would never produce the effect they do if the simplicity were only simple and the plainness merely plain.

c

The Greek thing has a Greek name. Thus it comes about that the history of Irony is involved in the history of this word *Eironeia*, with the study of which we can therefore properly begin. Of this there is one trifling but tiresome consequence. It is long before *Eironeia* comes to mean anything like what we mean by Irony, and yet I have no other word whereby to translate it. My plan has been to write Irony and Ironical throughout, hoping by means of the capitals to save myself with the reader. But he may simply be irritated.

II

a

THE word *Eironeia* is not found in any early writer (as students of Classical Greek count early), and even *Eiron*, from which it is derived, occurs first in Aristophanes, who uses it of one versed in every kind of unscrupulous trickery.[1] A later writer of Comedy, Philemon, has it of a fox, contrasting it with another epithet which means 'straightforward.'[2] The matter has been discussed in two articles or monographs by a German scholar,[3] which, though written many years ago, are still sound and valuable. One discovers from Ribbeck that the word *Eiron* came into literature through Comedy, having perhaps been introduced by Cratinus, a predecessor of Aristophanes, and that it meant at first 'cunning,' 'wily,' 'sly'—something like that. This does not seem very helpful. Even the set definitions of Irony one reads in Aristotle and Theophrastus are merely formal and, as it were, diagrammatic. Irony is put in its place in the scheme of moral qualities and there left to explain itself. The case of Plato is somewhat extraordinary. He has nowhere discussed the full meaning and nature of Irony, although of Irony, as we now understand it, he is in a sense the creator as

[1] *Clouds*, 449. Cf. *Wasps*, 174.
[2] *Fr.*, 89, Kock.
[3] O. Ribbeck, *Ueber den Begriff des Eiron*, Rheinische Museum, xxxi. 381 f., and *Alazon*.

he remains perhaps the greatest master. Why do we never get from him the subtle discussion we should have expected? Was it because in every new Dialogue (in those earlier creative days) he himself was giving a new extension to the meaning of Irony, so that his own mind was never fully satisfied until, when the discussion might have come, he was absorbed in other and, as they seemed to him then, more important matters?

It is at first sight curious that the Greeks, a people so apt to speculation, should be so trite and inarticulate concerning a thing so native to them. Yet after all it is what might be looked for. In the greatest period of ancient literature literary criticism hardly existed. So it is not surprising that Irony, as a quality in style, has nowhere received adequate treatment. But there was another reason for this. It might almost be called a philological one, for it lies in the origin of the word *Irony* itself. Its etymology has never been ascertained, and very likely never will be, for it has all the appearance of a colloquialism. As we saw, it was long in fighting its way into literature, and even then got in only by the back door of Comedy. It was a 'vulgar' word. So when the thing it denoted had become anything but vulgar, the name for it appeared no longer suitable; and that is one main reason why we have no adequate treatment in antiquity of 'Irony' as such. Other, less legitimate, terms were sometimes used to express the quality; but it was easier to let it impose itself.

b

Since the word *Eiron* is of popular origin, the character it designates, the 'Ironical Man' himself, is presumably

a type evolved among the people. And such he turns out to be. We are apt to connect Irony with a power of detachment from the multitude, and even from oneself, which seems incompatible with such an origin. But there is not ultimately any such incompatibility. There is about Irony nothing fundamentally anti-social ; rather the contrary. In point of fact we can trace the Ironical Man to his beginnings—and find him, not the remote and fastidious Intellectual, but someone far more elemental, simple, grotesque and pitiful.

The primitive man—by which one means, rather impudently, the man who has not yet learned to think as we do—is totally unscientific, but not without a wild kind of logic of his own. Therefore he is not to a sympathetic imagination simply unintelligible. We know that he looks upon natural objects—the rock, the tree, the fountain—as alive ; and this has been the cause of some rather stupid wonder. The wonder would be if he did not so regard them. He feels himself alive, and is shaken with desires and rages and terrors. Why should not the oak also be alive and troubled with like passions ? It was only gradually—most gradually—that he discovered that the oak had at least no human life ; and then he was disposed to grant it a superhuman one. It needs very little imagination to follow so natural a process. But it needs a great deal to live again even for a little in the sort of world created by this process. For, the distinction once made between the human and the non-human, or say rather the animate and the inanimate, nothing can make us forget it. Even Wordsworth, whose mind, I think, shows a kind of sublimated reversion to the primitive, could not forget it. Never

again can we move familiarly in a universe which seems all human even where it is not shaped humanly. With the most actively sympathetic imagination we can only half understand. Still, not to try would be fatal to understanding, besides being, in a phrase of Wordsworth's own, 'to encourage idleness and unmanly despair.'

c

In such a world, let a flood or a thunderstorm come, you will not say to yourself, 'What causes this flood' or 'this thunderstorm?' You will say 'The River' or 'the Sky is obviously angry; apparently with me. How shall I appease Him? If I were angry with a man myself (and he much weaker), how could I be appeased? With a yam perhaps, or a bit of copper wire. Or perhaps not. It would depend on how I felt at the time. So He.' In fact, Caliban has thought it all out:

'Saith He is terrible: watch His feats in proof!
One hurricane will spoil six good months' hope.
He hath a spite against me, that I know,
Just as He favours Prosper, who knows why?

That is the feeling: *He hath a spite against me.*

Even so, 'would have him misconceive, suppose
This Caliban strives hard and ails no less,
And always, above all else, envies Him;
Wherefore he mainly dances on dark nights
Moans in the sun, gets under holes to laugh,
And never speaks his mind save housed as now:
Outside, 'groans, 'curses. If He caught me here,
O'erheard this speech, and asked "What chucklest at?"
'Would, to appease Him, cut a finger off. . . .

So Caliban, who is much of a beast, reasons in his beastly way, leaving out all that makes the primitive man in his attitude to the divine kindly and truly human. But Caliban has touched something that is there, and most powerfully there. The primitive man, looking about him, aware of unseen presences all about him, will often be pitifully afraid. Books of anthropology might easily give one the impression that fear is his normal element. I will not readily believe this, for there is eating and drinking and love-making and sleep by the fire, and life on the whole is sweet. But in the dark or lonely or weary hour the terror will creep back. . . . Even civilized people know it well enough. In people who live simple lives, especially if they be much alone with Nature, like shepherds and fishermen, it is extraordinary how deeply rooted is a vague distrust of the universe. I have known a countryman, an earnest Presbyterian, to exclaim after a prolonged spell of rainy weather, " You would think They had a spite against us." The very words of Caliban.

If it feels like that, there are perhaps only two ways of escape for the human spirit. One is the way of faith, the other the way of reflection. Let me put the antithesis, whether false or true, thus boldly, for what I mean should be clear enough and hardly disputable. The way of reflection is what concerns us here. Crude enough reflection it is at first, so crude as hardly to deserve the name, and almost passively takes the imprint of experience. The Unseen Master will be like the master one knows so well in the hut or the village—the ' Old Man ' of the Family or King of the Tribe —capricious and incalculable, charged with dangerous

magic, dealing out now good, now evil, but above all jealous of his authority. On the whole it is best to keep out of his way, in case he notice you and do something unpleasant to you, if only to remind you of your position. The Other, the Unseen, vaguely more powerful than the King himself, is of course just like him. It is impossible to imagine him different. So it is best in his case also to lie low, to 'escape his notice,' as the Greek word says. Pretend at least to be of no importance in his sight, and then perhaps you may have a little fun and prosperity. For the gods are jealous.

Now this is a doctrine about which it is not easy for the modern man to be perfectly honest. Because it shocks his moral sense, he is inclined to say that it shocks his intelligence. But it need not do that. Merely as an hypothesis it is a very striking and plausible one. Among great masses of men to-day in Christendom there is a repressed inclination to believe it, or something like it. It may be moralized into something very grand, as it was by Puritanism; but the fact remains that Puritanism had to take account of it, had to weave this dark thread into its tissue. As a simple fact of history the jealousy of God was understood at least as early as His lovingkindness, and the thought of it may not convince but may thrill us yet. There is no ground, then, for surprise that Greek popular morality accepted this teaching of the *Phthonos Tôn Theôn*, the Jealousy of the Gods. For many reasons it was not surprising.

But first let us see what the doctrine was. The clearest statement is in Herodotus. Artabanos says to Xerxes: *Thou seest the towering creatures how God thundereth against them and will not suffer them to be a*

show, while the humble He vexeth not at all. Thou seest how His bolts fall ever on the loftiest habitations and the loftiest trees. For God loveth to minish all towering things. Thus also a mighty host is by a weaker destroyed in like manner, when God hating them casteth among them a terror or a thundercrash, whereby they perish in unseemly fashion. For God suffereth none but Himself to be proud.[1] I think that Herodotus, with his fine sense of the dramatic, has imparted to this speech of a great Oriental personage a touch of that ' barbaric simplicity ' which so interests and amuses him. But there is no essential difference between the sentiments of Artabanos and those of Solon, not merely a typical Greek but the typical Athenian, in his interview with Croesus :[2] " *I know, O Croesus, that all that is Divine is jealous and makes confusion.*" In neither speech are we dealing with history, but with legend. It is just this which makes the doctrine so important for our inquiry. Solon is the mouthpiece of popular philosophy.

d

The doctrine of the Divine Jealousy shows a turn for reflection, its statement a certain aptitude for words. The really primitive man enjoys neither power. It is not words that are for him the readiest means of expressing himself. It is gesture, of which the most elaborate form is the dance. Can we, then, get behind the statement of the popular belief in words to its statement in the dance ? Somewhat beyond expectation we can. It is common ground that the Attic Drama, both Tragedy and Comedy grew out of the performance of a band of

[1] Herod., vii. 10. [2] *Ibid.*, i. 30 f.

Sacred Dancers. What the exact meaning of this performance was is hardly part of my theme, and remains a subject of controversy. But no reasonable person disputes that the Jealousy of Heaven, generally moralized and justified, is the current theme of Greek Tragedy. That we may postpone to a later discussion. Meanwhile the case of Comedy seems more immediately helpful. Normally it presents an *Agon* or Contest between two types of character, the *Alazon* or Impostor and the *Eiron*.[1] The Impostor (or Impostors, for the characters may be reduplicated) comes on the scene with loud vauntings and pretentions, but is finally routed by the Ironical Man, who proves to be no such fool as he sometimes affects to be. Here the actual word greets us. Let us consider this *Eiron*.

There is only one way of understanding him, and that is through his relation to the *Alazon*. *Eiron* and *Alazon* are correlative terms, like Greek and Barbarian. Each explains the other; neither is intelligible apart from the other. The *Alazon* professes to be something more, the *Eiron* to be something less, than he is. As Cicero[2] puts it, the former *simulates*, the latter *dissimulates*. The antithesis is neat, but does not fill the mind. For that we require instances.

e

I find that Aelian regards the peacock as a good type of the Impostor. Aelian was perhaps a little of the *Alazon* himself, like most of his profession, so he may

[1] For this see chiefly Zielinski, *Gliederung d. altattischen Komodie*, Leipzig, 1885, and F. M. Cornford, *The Origin of Attic Comedy*, London, 1914.

[2] *De Offic.*, i. 30.

be a good judge. This is what he says of the peacock :[1] *He knows himself the loveliest of birds, and even knows wherein his beauty resides, and prides himself thereon, and is haughty and emboldened by his feathers. . . . He rears his head and moves it up and down in a very haughty manner, quite as if he were tossing a warrior's crest. . . . And he conducts himself about, elaborately developing the variety of his plumage, demonstrating that his own array surpasses the raiment of the Medes and the embroideries of the Persians—really in the most affected way!* One remembers the passage in the *Acharnians* where the Athenian envoys, returning from Persia with all the airs and splendours of the Oriental court, provoke the *Ironical* hero of the piece to exclaim, "*I do* not *like ambassadors and peacocks and swank.*"[2] So Aelian was not original. He would not be.

The peacock is not the only animal which has served for a type of the *Alazon*. There is, for instance, surprisingly to us, that honest beast, the horse. Then there is that fox in Aesop. *Once upon a time some foxes gathered at the river Maeander to drink ; but owing to the rush and roar of the water they did not dare to enter it, though pressing one another to do so. But one of them, expatiating on the matter with the notion of making the others look cheap, and jeering at their poltroonery, selected herself as a nobler animal and gallantly sprang into the river, where the current swept her into mid-stream. The others stood along the bank exclaiming : "Don't leave us to ourselves! Come back and show us the way in, where we may drink without danger!" Then, in the act of being carried away, "I have business," said she, "at Miletus—*

[1] *Hist. Nat.* [2] Ar. *Acharn.*, 62–3 (*ἀλαζονεύμασιν*).

where the river enters the sea—*which I must take there. I will show you when I come back.*" Moral: *Applies to those who bring danger upon themselves by their* Alazoneia.

From this it appears that the fox is not always *Eiron*. You will perceive, however, that there is Irony in the story. I do not say in the mind of the writer, for the author of the version which I quote—it is late, anonymous and incompetent—is merely setting down a fable as old and fatherless as a nursery rhyme. Even his language, which is at once pretentious and vague, like bad journalism, cannot wholly kill the flavour of the story. That is the interesting thing. For these fables, called of Aesop, reflect the popular philosophy of life, and they are saturated in Irony. It is not as if you could argue that the Irony was too rude or elementary to deserve the name. There is nothing in Swift so 'universal,' nothing more profound and searching, nothing perhaps quite so deadly convincing as, in its simple way, is the story of the Dog and the Bone or the story of the Fox and the Grapes. Or is all subtlety lacking in the Irony of this? *A woman, who had recently buried her husband, used to go daily to his tomb and make lamentation. A man who was ploughing not far from the tomb fell into a desire of the woman, and, leaving his oxen, went himself also to the tomb and, sitting down, lamented along with the woman. Upon her asking why he too was making this moan, "Because," says he, "I have buried a charming wife, and whenever I weep I feel a lightening of the burthen." Says she, "That is just my case too." Says he, "If, then, we are involved in the same misfortune, why not make a match of it? I will love you just like her, and do you love me in return as you loved your husband." This per-*

suaded the woman, and they did make a match of it. In the meantime came a thief, and loosed the cattle, and drove them off. And the man on his return, failing to find the oxen, proceeded to beat his breast and groan very vehemently. Then came the woman also and, finding him deploring his case, exclaimed, "In tears again?" "This time," said the fellow, "the tears are genuine."

There is about this what might seem a touch of cynicism. Fables are apt to appear cynical. Here is another from the same collection: *A middle-aged man had two mistresses, one old, the other young. The old one used to pull out his black hairs, wishing to have him old; the young one, his grey: until they made him bald and a scandal in the eyes of all.* Moral: *That he is to be pitied who falls into the hands of women.* But these stories are not really cynical: they are only comic. In a way they are not even sincere; they 'dissimulate' a real affection for women; they are Ironical. So far as the humour tastes a trifle bitter in the mouth, that is because it is crushed so pure from hard roots of experience. Once Themistocles came to the island of Andros with an army and a demand for money, saying that the Athenians had two gods with them—*Persuasion* and *Inevitable Compulsion.* The people of Andros Ironically congratulated the Athenians on possessing two such profitable gods, while the Andrians had two whom nothing could induce to leave the country, namely *Poverty* and *Inability-to-Pay.*[1] That story is in Herodotus, who knows how to write. But something of its pungent essence distils from this fable in the collection. *Zeus having fashioned a man and a woman commanded Hermes*

[1] Herod., viii. 111.

to lead them down to the ground and show them where to dig for the means of enriching themselves. When he performed his task Earth at first sought to prevent it ; but when Hermes used compulsion, saying that Zeus had so ordered it, she said, " Then let them dig as much of me as they list, for with sighs and tears they will pay it back again." It is the sort of thing that people without thinking are ready to call a cheap commonplace. If they thought about it, they might see that the cheapness had been in their own minds.

f

Greek literature is full of what look like commonplaces, if by a commonplace we mean a truth badly, because tritely, expressed. But there is an ambiguity here, obvious enough but from its importance for the subject worth clearing up. We say, for instance, that poetry is for ever dealing with ' the great commonplaces ' like love and death. But poetry itself is never commonplace. That is because " poetry," as Shelley has said in language borrowed from Wordsworth, " poetry makes the common as if it were not common " by the magic of the poet's speech. What is a merit in the subject is a fault in the expression of it. Now Greek literature is full of commonplaces, in the original meaning of the word ; that is, it prefers to deal with the topics most familiar to men and treated a thousand times before. But, as I said, it often seems to give them a trite expression. The appearance is turned into reality in nearly all translations except the ' Elizabethan,' which were made at a time when English had the natural originality of classical Greek.

Whoever writes about the ancients has no difficulty so great as this. How is he to communicate to his readers the sense of that unfading freshness which all scholars, whose minds are not dull or weary, find in Greek style at its best? The impression is not a mere fantasy of the scholars; the history of European literature, continually refreshing itself at the old source, sufficiently proves this. But how is the scholar to convey the magic? There seems to be only one way, by adequate translation. And the thing is all but impossible! Those who try to reproduce, by what they are fond to call 'faithful' translation, the simplicity of Greek style, lose in the process all its freshness, all its subtlety. They change truths into truisms. On the other hand, the man who does make his translation read like good English very often merely cannot afford to be as simple as his original, the languages being so different; and so, while he may give us an effect as well worth having, in its way, it will not be the effect of simplicity.

g

Great style has the nature of revelation; it opens our eyes to unsuspected beauty and meaning. It moves as well as enlightens, working on hidden depths of feeling within us, touching a secret spring. Let a writer succeed in this and he can never be trite or commonplace. That can never be trite to which the intelligence never responds without emotion. This is how the Greek scholar is affected by the simple-seeming Greek words, which in his translation yield only a platitude. The spell is in the Greek words, and there

only; no alien words will work. For the value of words for the artist lies in their associations, and the associations of Greek words are quite different from those we attach to the English words into which we 'translate' the Greek. Think, for example, of the translations we give of *Sophrosyne*. To feel the true meaning of that strange and beautiful word one must become an ancient Greek again, inheriting the experience of his race—a thing literally impossible. One may, by a genuine exercise of imagination, divine something of all it once has meant; that is the privilege and reward of the scholar. In the same way with regard to Irony in the early stages of its history, one has to practise something of this divination.

III

a

We have in the plays of Aristophanes the first great development surviving to us of the humorous aspect of Irony. It is hardly Irony in the modern sense—it is too boisterous and elemental for that—but it is Irony all the same. Aristophanes, to be sure, is unique, and critics (including Meredith) have assigned to him qualities not always quite consistent with each other, it being hard otherwise to give some idea of this uniqueness. A more profitable way is by examining first the unique instrument with which he worked. The Old Comedy is like nothing else except its imitations. This affects the nature of its Irony. A reader fresh from Jane Austen or Thackeray, from Addison or Anatole France, might fail to notice in Aristophanes any of their quality at all. He would notice perpetual wit, perpetual satire, and an unequalled, a daemonic agility of mind; but he would incline to think, "There is nothing adumbrated here—nothing that reaches beyond itself. Everything is emptied out at once as from a cornucopia. You might as well call the *Pickwick Papers* Ironic."

Now I believe this critic would be wrong. He would be wrong because he would be looking for Irony in the details, where a modern writer would put it, rather than in the whole. He would be forgetting that a comedy of Aristophanes, however original in its working

out, had to operate under certain restrictions. It was the product of a tradition and the elaboration of a ritual. Its structure, therefore, under whatever variation of incident, must remain true to type. Its plot must be the defeat of the *Alazon* by the *Eiron*. The ancient spectator knew this; the modern reader should never forget it. But, if we keep it constantly in mind, see what happens. The Impostor comes upon the stage. We know he is doomed to exposure. We watch him moving in boundless self-assurance nearer and nearer to the moment when he shall be stripped of all his pretences. And to watch so is to have the sense of Irony.

b

There is one exception to the rule among the plays of Aristophanes, and the exception is perhaps the finest of them all. It is the *Birds*. Two Athenians, of whom the master-mind is called Pisthetaerus, disgusted with life on earth, particularly in Athens, set out for the Country of the Birds. This they discover, and after a dubious welcome Pisthetaerus, in a long and brilliant speech, induces the Birds to declare their independence of gods and men and build a walled city, to which is given the name *Nephelococcygia*, ' Cloud-Cuckoo-Land.' The new foundation is a paradise of peace and plenty, with the consequence that applicants for admission stream to its gates. Among these, as is natural, are several Impostors. They are ignominiously expelled. Finally the Olympians themselves, being cut off from supplies, surrender on terms, and the play ends with Pisthetaerus dancing off the stage in glory accompanied by his new Bride, the daughter of Zeus, and hearing

himself acclaimed as the 'New Zeus.' Now it is true that in the course of the drama Pisthetaerus routs Impostors, and therefore he might seem to be the *Eiron* of the piece. But in fact he is only a greater Impostor, though a not unsympathetic one. Alone of the Comedies the *Birds* celebrates the triumph of the *Alazon*.

Of this problem various solutions have been offered, not always free from a perverted ingenuity. The *Birds* may indeed have suggested more in the way of personal allusion than is clear to us now. But there is little use in guessing at that, and the really striking thing is that this play seems comparatively remote from the here and now of the others. May the explanation not simply be this, that Aristophanes, who had more of the poet in him than other satirists, desired for once to escape from political and literary controversy into a world where nothing matters but poetry? And that Aristophanes, who had more of the satirist in him than other poets, knew that Irony has a double edge and may be turned against the Ironist? One cannot tell how the public took it. It was a time of peculiar anxiety, every man heart-sick for Athens. It may have been delightful to feel with the poet: "If only dreams came true! If we could but escape to some far-off place, where we could not only laugh, but even be happy!" So when that audience poured out of the theatre, if their minds went back to the *Birds*, did it not seem to them Ironical enough?

c

From the exception let us pass to the rule. We may be content with an instance or two, for the type of the

Aristophanic Comedy is not complex or difficult. They might be hard to choose, if it were not that some have a special appropriateness to the history of Irony. Accordingly I have selected an episode from the *Acharnians*, in which Euripides appears, and the *Clouds*, in which the principal *Alazon* is Socrates.

d

The *Acharnians* is the earliest surviving play of Aristophanes. His art was greatly to mature in later years; nevertheless nearly all of his qualities and nearly all of his opinions are already there. And there too, in the character of *Alazon*, is the man during all of whose later life, and even after death, he never ceased to attack. It cannot have happened often, this vendetta of an artist of genius against another, a whole generation older, for his too-advanced thinking and his disturbing innovations. It seems like a reversal of Nature. Yet this is what happened between Euripides and Aristophanes. One of the charges against the tragic poet was his realism. It was thought a fault in him that, when he brought upon the stage a character who in legend was lame or a beggar, he positively made that character limp or look like a beggar—nay, even dressed him in actual rags. The modern reader is bound to think such a criticism ludicrous or even unintelligible. There is, however, an argument based upon the nature of the Greek tragic convention which cannot be refuted simply by a smile. This argument need not be discussed just yet; but may permit ourselves at once to recognize that the charge (however humorously stated) was seriously meant. It was therefore not like the insinuation (about which

scholars have written too much) that Euripides' mother was not a 'lady,' as the mere facts seem to prove, but a vegetable woman.[1] The point that Euripides was corrupting the idealistic convention of Tragedy is constantly being made by Aristophanes and is still being made by those who agree with him. No doubt he has other points—some better and some worse—but he can hardly be said to make them in the *Acharnians*. There is no call to write a study of the play here. The episode I have selected is complete enough for our purpose. Dicaeopolis has been caught in the act of enjoying the delights of peace by a number of imperially-minded old gentlemen in the coal business. This while there is a war on. He begs for a hearing. They consent on certain conditions. He is to plead with his head on a block and is to suffer execution if his plea be unconvincing. Dicaeopolis is reminded of a similar scene in the *Telephus* of Euripides, and the thought comes to him: "Why not go to Euripides and ask for a loan of the properties which made such a hit in the play?"

Dicaeopolis appears before the poet's house a simple wooden structure of two stories. After the speaking of a few sentences, a mechanical device is employed to reveal the interior of the house. Euripides is discovered seated on the upper floor with the manuscript of a play in his hand and dressed in rags. More rags hang upon nails about the room. He and his secretary, Cephisophon, speak in an exaggerated 'tragic' diction; it is a mark of the *Alazon*. On the other hand, Dicaeopolis, the *Eiron*, talks plain Attic. This makes a difficulty in translation. It seems impossible to reproduce this effect of contrast

[1] The real gravamen of this slander is explained in [Demosth.] *In Neaeram*, § 67.

except in verse, and equally impossible to write that with any grace. 'Be thou familiar, but by no means vulgar,' must have been prophetically intended for translators of Aristophanes.

(DICAEOPOLIS *knocks at* EURIPIDES' *door*.)

THE SECRETARY CEPHISOPHON. Who knocks there?
DIC. Is Euripides at home?
CEPH. At home and not at home—if thou hast wit——
DIC. At home and not at home?
CEPH. The mark was hit.
His soul is culling verse-flowers far away,
But the mere man's upstairs writing a play.
DIC. He's lucky to have you to make so clear
An answer. Say I'll interview him here.
CEPH. You can't.
DIC. Don't keep me waiting any more.
I mean to keep on hammering at the door. . . .
Euripides! Good old Euripides!
Answer the door now, won't you? Please, oh please!
It's Dicaeopolis that's calling you.
EURIPIDES (*within*). Time lacks.
DIC. Euripides!
EUR. What shrillest?
DIC. Say,
Do you prefer the garret for your play,
When you might have the ground-floor? So that's why
You have lame heroes in your poetry!
You're dressed in all your stage-rags too? I see
Why you put beggars in a tragedy!
(*Coming to business*). There was a drama you once put before us—

I have to make a long speech to the Chorus,
And if I fail they mean to have my blood. . . .
From that old piece give me one poor old dud!
EUR. What sackcloth meanest? (*Lifting a rag from a nail*).
This, that not debarred
Oeneus to plead, that old man evil-starred?
DIC. Not his, but someone else's even more
Down on his luck.
EUR. What sightless Phoenix wore?
DIC. Not Phoenix, someone still more down and out.
EUR. For whose rent raiment makes he such a rout?
The beggar Philoctetes?
DIC. No, by crimes!
I mean that fellow who was fifty times
More beggarly than Philoctetes went.
EUR. (*lifting another rag*). What? Woulds't thou have these garments foul-besprent
Worn by the halting knight Bellerophon?
DIC. No, you may leave Bellerophon alone.
And yet the fellow that I have in mind
Was a lame beggar too, would talk you blind.
EUR. I know him! Telephus of Mysia.
DIC. Telephus! Right! Do give me *his* clouts, pray.
EUR. (*to* CEPHISOPHON). Of Telephus bestow on him the rags.
They lie above the Thyestean tags,
'Twixt them and those of Ino.
CEPH. (*to* DICAEOPOLIS). Now, sir, there!
DIC. (*holding the rags up to the light*). Sky, that look'st down and through and everywhere,

Now for the most depressing rig you'd find!
(*He puts on the rags, then addresses* EURIPIDES *again*).
Euripides, since you have been so kind,
Give me the skull-cap that goes with the slops,
Because to-day I have to fool the cops,
Be what I am but seem another wight [1]—
The audience knowing who I am all right,
But all the Chorus standing by in rows
Like fools, for me to lead them by the nose.

EUR. (*delightedly recognizing his own methods*). Granted; for subtle thoughts revolve in you.

DIC. (*putting on the cap*). God bless you—and give Telephus his due! . . .

Glory, how phrases crowd upon me thick! . . .
But still I would like just a beggar's stick.

EUR. (*handing him the stick*). Take this, and leave my portal's marble grace.

DIC. (*soliloquizing*). You see, Heart, how the door's shut in my face
With half my make-up missing! Stick it, Heart,
Beg, pray!—Euripides, you *must* impart
A wicker lamp-case burnt through by the flame.

EUR. What needs thee, wretched, the reed-woven frame?

DIC. No need; I want it.

EUR. (*offended*). We would be alone. Leave us.

DIC. (*whining*). A-ow, bless you—like your ma that's gone!

EUR. (*relenting and handing over the lamp-case*). Now get thee hence.

[1] A quotation from the *Telephus* of Euripides.

DIC. All right; but won't you slip
Me just one small cup with a broken lip?

EUR. (*giving it*). There, with a murrain, troubler of my roof!

DIC. Come now, you know quite well who needs reproof! . . .
Now, honey, make one last, one final plunge!
Give me a pitcher bunged up with a sponge.

EUR. O man, man, thou wilt strip me of mine art!
Nay, take it and begone.

DIC. Now I'll depart.
But stay—there's one thing I must have or swing.
Darling Euripides, just one more thing!
With that I'll go and never more be seen.
Put in the lamp a bit of withered green.

EUR. (*despairingly*). Ah, thou wilt ruin me! (*Giving a handful of some small vegetable.*) But lo thee! So
Vanish my works!

DIC. There's more yet, but I go.
For I am over-troublesome, God wot,
Feigning the princes love, that love me not.[1]
—O hang it all, I'm done! I clean forgot
The most important matter of the lot.
Euripides, you dear, delightful thing,
God damn me if one more request I bring
But this one thing, this little one thing more . . .
Give me a chervil from your mother's store.

EUR. (*outraged*). The man breathes insult. Close the stablished hall.

DIC. (*going at last*). Heart, we must go unchervilled, after all.

[1] Quoting the *Telephus* again.

'Some admirable nonsense about the ragged heroes of Euripides—one really brilliant stroke (*Will you take from me my art?*)—a good gibe at the convention which imposed on the Tragic Chorus an incredible blindness to what was happening before their eyes—a bad one at Euripides' dead mother—and all the time straightforward, unadulterated farce.' Such might be the comment of the casual reader. Not very different, so far as I can find, is the comment of literary historians, of scholars and critics. But is Dicaeopolis so forthright as all that? That would not be at all like the *Eiron* he is. We should remember that he is pleading the cause of peace in the middle of a war, pleading even for the Spartan enemy. It is an occasion at the very least for tactful speaking. No, Dicaeopolis is not such a fool as he looks; that is the 'Irony' of the situation. And anyone who reads the play through with this in his mind will feel that Irony in it all the time.

e

The *Clouds* is an attack upon Socrates. The charges made there against him are those on which long afterwards he was put to death: that he was a corrupter of youth, a believer in strange gods, one that made the worse appear the better reason. That Aristophanes would have voted for the death of Socrates is what no one who understands the two men will believe. But in Plato's *Apology* Socrates is made to say that the *Clouds* had deepened the prejudice against him, and I fear it is true. Such dangers lie in the service of the Comic Dionysus, who must have his jest at all costs. In life they were friends, even as Plato has represented them

in the *Symposium*. There is a story (not well authenticated) that during the performance of the *Clouds* Socrates stood up in the audience, that all might see the poet's original. It would be like the Socrates we know to do that. The humility which accompanied (as humility will) an invincible belief in the value of the work he was doing no doubt enabled him to meet the attack upon himself with equanimity. And when he listened to the ridicule poured on his scientific interests—he who was to declare ' the bankruptcy of science ' and ' bring down Philosophy from heaven to earth '—surely he must have laughed with Aristophanes.

The opening scene of the *Clouds* presents an Athenian interior. The time is just before the dawn. Strepsiades, an elderly citizen, is discovered, awake but still in bed. His son Phidippides is asleep and dreaming about his favourite sport of horse-racing, occasionally speaking in his sleep. The old man soliloquizes about his debts, which he can no longer meet, about the extravagance of his son, about his own folly in marrying an aristocratic and expensive wife. His night-long reflections have not been entirely fruitless; he has thought of a plan for getting the better of his creditors.

In pursuance of this he wakens Phidippides, and with some little persuasion gets him outside and so to a low house with a low door. " What is it, father ? " says the lad. Strepsiades answers :

It's where the Wise Souls have their School of Thought.
Here dwell the men who prove that Heaven is wrought
Like a close grate, and we're the coals within.
They also, for a fee, teach you to win
Whatever case you're pleading, good or bad.

PHIDIPPIDES. Their names ?
STREPSIADES. I've not the memory I had . . .
But they've a serious mission to refine
Thought, the good gentlemen.
PH. I know the swine !
Bare-footed frauds with faces white as bone,
Like that wretch Socrates and Chaerephon !

In fine, the boy flatly refuses to be taught by such people, and so nothing is left but that the old man should take a course in the School himself. He knocks at the door, and, after colloquy with a pale and ingenious student, is admitted to the presence of Socrates. He finds the Master suspended from the roof in a basket, and hails him. There follows this conversation, conducted on the part of Socrates in the affected ' tragic ' manner of the *Alazon*, on the part of Strepsiades in colloquial style :

SOC. Wherefore dost call me, creature of a day ?
STR. First tell me what you're doing aloft there, pray.
SOC. I tread on air, my thoughts embrace the sun.[1]
STR. Then do your thoughts embrace God, making fun,
Not from the ground but from a basket ?
SOC. Yea,
Meteorological phenomena
I could not accurately investigate,
Unless the faculty to cerebrate
I could suspend, to flutter thin and clear,
And mingle with the kindred atmosphere.

[1] Socrates uses a word of ambiguous meaning, since it suggests to ' despise ' as well as ' to think about.' Strepsiades thinks of the first meaning. Also, to him the sun is a god.

Had I from earth studied celestial laws,
I had discovered nothing. For Earth draws
Thought-moisture to herself. And this holds good
Of watercress.
STR. Can I have understood ?
Thought draws the moisture into watercress ?

So much for Strepsiades' understanding of a current speculation that thought was of the nature of air !

There is a ceremony of rather curious elaboration by which Strepsiades is initiated into the discipline of the School. This is followed by an invocation of the Clouds, the patron goddesses of Socrates. They obey the call and in charming language proclaim their arrival in holy Athens. Strepsiades is amazed, and asks if they are perhaps Heroines. (He would think of a Heroine as half-divine, a mortal woman who had become immortal through the love of a god.) No, says Socrates, they are the Clouds and great goddesses, for they teach the whole art of dialectic and mystification. What of Zeus ? questions the innocent candidate. Zeus ? exclaims the other ; there is no such being. The effective ruler of the universe is *Dinos* (Vortex. I suppose we should now say Atomic Energy). After a little explaining Strepsiades accepts this, and adopts Socrates' creed, which is belief in " Void, Clouds and Tongue, These Three." But, he pursues, it was not exactly for this that he had applied to the academy. What he really wants to know is how to win law-suits even when you have not got a case ; and he becomes dithyrambic in his protestations that for such knowledge he is ready to undergo any toil of preparation. And with that he enters what he calls ' the cave.'

There is a break in the action here to admit the performance by the Chorus of the Parabasis, a sort of lyrical address to the audience, which was a principal element of the Old Comedy. The Parabasis over, Strepsiades and Socrates reappear at the door of the academy. The pupil is examined in metres, in the gender of nouns and the proper form of the feminine—and fails to satisfy the examiner. He gets, as I wish modern candidates did, a chance to show if he has more originality than receptiveness; let him think out the solution of some problem for himself. This also he conspicuously fails to do. The only thing left for him, he now feels, is to induce Phidippides to take his place. In this, after going and coming, he finally succeeds.

There follows an Interlude, suggested no doubt by a rather favourite form in the literature of the Sophistic movement. Two figures appear, one dressed in a careless old-fashioned manner, the other a dandy in the latest cry of fashion. The first is the Just Logos, the second the Unjust Logos. After an exercise in 'flyting,' they argue their claims before Phidippides. Alas! the Unjust Logos is so persuasive that he convinces even his opponent; after which what is the poor young man to believe? He enters the academy, and soon becomes an enthusiastic and brilliant disciple of Socrates. With this aid Strepsiades very confidently awaits the future. His creditors he flouts and defies, and enters his house to celebrate the occasion in feasting with his son.

Now comes the turning-point of the play. With cries and lamentation Strepsiades breaks from the house pursued by Phidippides, who, as the old man protests to the Chorus, has been outrageously assaulting him.

They had quarrelled about the merits of Euripides. The young man justifies himself by arguments taught, we are left to infer, by Socrates.

PHID. Didn't you beat me when a boy?
STR. Yes, in my love and care,
For your own good entirely.
PHID. Well, you must admit it's fair
For *me* to beat *you* out of love, since love is shown in kicks.
Why should your hide get off scot-free and mine get all the licks?
I was born free as well as you, you'll please remember. What?
The children weep, and deemest thou the children's sire shall not? [1]
You'll say society decrees the child must face the pain.
I answer with the proverb *An old man's a child again.*
To be quite fair the old should get more beatings than the young,
As much more as they have the less excuse for going wrong.
STR. To beat one's father is the law in no community.
PHID. Was not the man who made that law the same as you and I,
And won his point by *reasoning* with his old-world audience?
Then why may I not just as well make it the law from hence
That sons shall beat their fathers? (All the knocks we got before
We will remit and wipe the cracks you gave us off the score.)

[1] Parodying a line in the *Alcestis* of Euripides, l. 691.

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See how the fowls and all the beasts punish their fathers ! Still
They're just like us—bar asking leave to introduce a Bill.
STR. Well, if to be the fowl complete's the object of your search,
Why don't you scratch on dunghills and go roost upon a perch ?

To which indeed Phidippides can only reply that that is quite a different matter !

The old man now, repentant and despairing, meditates revenge upon Socrates and the academy. Calling on Hermes to forgive and help him, he attacks the roof with mattock and fire. A disciple rushes out shouting. To his expostulations, " What are you doing ? " Strepsiades replies, " Doing ? Oh, just discussing some refinements with the rafters." Another disciple and then another fly out like bees from a smoking ; finally Socrates himself. " What *are* you doing, you there upon the roof ? " " *I tread the air ; my thoughts embrace the sun.*" The scene, and the play, ends with the mingled imprecations of Hermes and Strepsiades against those who had denied the gods. The language of Strepsiades is interesting in its anticipation of similar words employed against scientific men in later times. " What meant you," he asks, " by insulting the gods and spying upon the seat of the moon ? "

Before we leave the *Clouds*, let us remark a brief strange passage which strikes a note out of harmony, you would say, with the rest. When Strepsiades at last realizes his folly, there ensues this dialogue between him and the Chorus : " *Ye are the cause, O Clouds, that this has befallen me, who put all my fortunes in your keeping.*" " *Nay, thyself art to thyself responsible for*

this, who didst turn thyself to evil courses." "*Why then did ye not tell me this at that time, but encouraged an old man country-bred?*" "*Always we do this when we perceive a man lusting for evil courses, that we may cast him into suffering, so that he may learn to fear the gods.*" "*Ah me, a sore punishment, O Clouds, but just!*" That is all. The comedy plunges again into roaring merriment and the smashing of stage furniture. But something had happened. It was as if the comic mask had slipped off for a moment and shown to the startled theatre a tragic and indignant face.

f

In this very brilliant comedy, as in all the rest, there is surely something more than that 'rollicking humour,' that fantastical and witty and lyrical farce, which so many critics have seemed content to find in Aristophanes. I am not alluding to any serious purpose he may have entertained. Nor, having already noted the 'Ironical' shrewdness of Dicaeopolis, need I dwell on the same quality underlying the rustic simplicity of Strepsiades. But something more needs to be said. There is in Aristophanes a conscious intellectual superiority to his puppets, even when he is most sympathetic. He never identifies himself with any of his characters; he sees through them all. The ordinary dramatist or novelist forgets himself in his own creations, puts for the time being all of himself into them. Aristophanes puts himself into his characters, otherwise he would be no dramatist at all, or a bad one; but he does not put all of himself. Some part of him keeps watching his persons as they strut and talk, watches them with a detached, amused interest—*Ironically*.

IV

a

Mr. F. M. Cornford, whose book on the *Origin of Greek Comedy* is full of illumination on this subject, has shown that the *Alazoneia* of Comedy is but another aspect of what in Tragedy is called *Hubris*. The essence of both is 'going too far'; only what is funny in the Impostor is tragic in the heroic or partly heroic man. I need not repeat what Cornford has put in convincing detail, but I may put his conclusion in a way consonant with what I have said before. I said that the man of primitive mind apparently finds it natural to believe that he lives encompassed by jealous powers watching him unseen. He therefore thinks to himself: "It were safest for me to make myself very small and insignificant, so that the Jealous Eye may not strike me." This thought, refined but never quite refined away, recurs in Greek Tragedy to a degree familiar to every reader. But Safety First has never been the only maxim of any tolerable human life. Man is born a rebel against circumstance. Now there are two moods in which he may confront the jealous gods besides the mood of helpless acquiescence. He may defy them, or he may laugh in his sleeve at them. The former mood implies a tragic, the latter a comic, view of life. It would be more strictly accurate to put the matter in this way. (For the element of sympathy, the point of view of the

onlooker, is essential to Drama.) We watch the hero challenge Destiny and fall, and we feel that this is tragic. We observe the fool running his head against the force of circumstances, and that (if the consequences are not serious) we feel to be comic. In either case, it must be added, the feeling is mixed with Irony—I mean, if we take the Greek view. And so the Tragic and the Comic Irony are in the last resort the same.

The latter we have to some extent already discussed and illustrated. But the Tragic Irony? I find some difficulty here, since scholars can write as if it were an incidental matter. There is a thing traditionally called 'Sophoclean Irony.' It is the device, often strikingly effective, which puts in the mouth of a character language whose full significance is not perceived by himself but only by his hearers, who know, as he does not, the doom that awaits him. There are scholars who write as if, in mentioning this verbal form of Irony, they had exhausted the subject. Why, a Greek tragedy is all Ironical; it is Ironical in its very nature. This is the true and vital difference between the ancient and the modern Drama. To miss this is to miss the whole point.

Imagine the feelings of a spectator at the trial of Charles I. And, first, let the spectator be a London citizen, who has lived through the Civil War. He finds himself one of the crowd before the scaffold waiting for the King to appear, to kneel before the block, to lose his head. He knows and can foresee all that will happen. All? Not quite all; he cannot foresee that the King will step from that particular opening in the front of Whitehall, that the headsman will make that particular gesture, that Bishop Juxon will bow to hear the thrilling

word " Remember," that a roll of drums will drown the groans of the multitude, that some will dip their handkerchiefs in the blood. But the essential thing he does know: Charles Stuart is about to die. The emotion with which he follows every stage of the proceedings is coloured by that knowledge. So true is this, that to see happen the things he has foreseen in the way he foresaw is actually more exciting than the unexpected incidents. When the end is certainly known, the unexpected incidents are a relief, not a heightening, of the tension. And to know that the inevitable feet of Death are thus visibly, thus measurably advancing on one whose history is known with a kind of passionate intimacy is to see a strange and awful light reflected forward upon all he will now do and suffer.

But now suppose our spectator is a casual foreigner ignorant of all that, an Armenian say, newly landed for the first time in his life in the city of London. He comes suddenly upon the scaffold and the crowd. It is not the sort of scaffold he is used to, but it has a sufficiently ominous look, and it arrests his attention. The executioner mounts the scaffold with his axe; this is yet more ominous. The King appears, his whole look and bearing and surroundings marking him out as the leading actor in this scene. The stranger guesses him to be some great figure, perhaps even guesses him for what he is; and a deepening excitement takes hold of him. He notices the block, and doubts its purpose. The King kneels and lays his head upon it, resolving the doubt. So the King of England is to be beheaded! But will these murmuring people suffer it? May there not be a rescue at the last moment? No; the axe

swings, the head falls. Thus to our imaginary Armenian everything has been novel, surprising, revealing itself step by step to the dreadful conclusion.

Now the spectator at a Greek tragedy was like the first onlooker at the death of Charles; the spectator at a typical modern tragedy is like the second.

b

Whatever variety and surprise the ancient Tragic dramatist might introduce in detail and incident, the end was known, and generally also the main lines of the plot. If there was any doubt, the poet himself would often take pains to remove it by a Prologue or similar device. Agamemnon must die by his wife's hand. Oedipus must learn his sin and fall from his high estate. This is known history, and the knowledge affects, say rather creates, the gazer's mood from the first, the dramatist employing every art to ensure this. People often express their wonder at the slow movement of a Greek tragedy. It has been regarded as a fault in the *Agamemnon* that the piece is so long in getting under way. What! does anyone suppose that the Londoner who saw his King die was uninterested in the preliminaries? Was it not just their deliberate movement, drawing out the agony, as we say, that seemed most terrible to him? So in the *Agamemnon* is it not the art by which the coming blow is suspended in a growing darkness of prophecy and terror that makes it beyond example awful and sublime?

But the method of the modern dramatist is to engage the interest of the house by a continual shock of the

unexpected. It sets one asking " *What* will happen ? " not, as the other method, the method of the Greeks, " *When* will it happen ? " And the difference is radical.

c

No doubt the Tragic Irony is not in all the tragedies, at any rate in the same degree. Some of these dramatize a legend which accounts merely for the institution of certain existing rites. Thus the *Eumenides* tells of the founding in Athens of an ancient worship surviving there in the poet's time. The *Ajax* of Sophocles gives the origin of the *Aianteia* or Commemoration of Aias in the Troad. Dramas even of this class are never merely, or indeed principally, concerned with the rituals they celebrate, but generally bring these in for little more than a splendid finale. The rest may be pure Tragedy. The *Eumenides* indeed has a happy ending. It appeals to the pride of the Athenians in one of their great national festivals. The touch of Irony would hardly be tolerated here. Yet the *Eumenides* is only part of the trilogy to which it belongs, and no one is likely to deny that this trilogy as a whole is a great, perhaps the greatest, expression in literature of the Tragic Irony we have been considering. Nor will any reader deny that the *Ajax* is thrilled through with a powerful and even mordant Irony.

V

We may consider the *Agamemnon*, for it is typical. No one but Aeschylus could have written it, since (apart from its greatness as poetry) it is the expression of a peculiarly intense and original mind. In spite of that, however, both in its subject, which is one of the great traditional subjects of the ancient stage, and in its method, it is as true to type as any Greek play that has come down to us. It were best simply to read the piece through, noting in every speech, sometimes in every line, sometimes in every word, the interchange, shadow and light, of the unknown and the known, making Irony. But here we must content ourselves with that killing thing, an analysis.

The first scene. The castle of Agamemnon in the Argolid ; a clear autumn night of stars ; a lonely sentinel on the roof. (Here is an opening almost stereotyped in the Romantic Drama. It is an interesting thing in Aeschylus that, while his method is 'Classical,' his mind often strikes one as 'Romantic' ; but this is partly an illusion.) The Watchman now leans upon the battlements, his chin upon his arms ('like a dog,' he says), now paces to and fro because of the cold and the dew and the desire of sleep, now looks at the stars, gets tired of this and begins to hum a tune ; but always ends in a lament for the sad state of the house in the ten years' absence of its master. This Watchman, brief and transitory as is his appearance, is not the least notable

character in the play. It is extraordinary—it is Shakespearean—the way we know him at the end of some forty short lines mainly devoted to information about other people. He is a common fellow, and his language is subtly but markedly distinguished from that of the royal personages who come later upon the stage. (In the great Tragic poets of Greece the characters do not, as many suppose, all speak in one diction.) He is a very honest man, this Watchman, with a vein of rustic humour of that allusive sort which is commonly attended by winks and nods. Not a promising character for a Tragedy, you surmise ? Yet he is a triumph in Aeschylus. The foolish ' mysteriousness ' of the clown passes insensibly through this great poet's art into something truly mysterious and disquieting. We realize that the Watchman is not talking about something he does not understand. He understands only too well . . . and might speak, save that (to use his own vivid phrase) ' a great ox has trodden on his tongue.' Why has he for a whole year been keeping watch on the palace roof ? It is to see a light—the blaze of the beacon on Mount Arachnaeum—which is to convey, the last in a series of such bonfires, the news that Troy has fallen. Even as he tells us this the mountain-blaze shines out. His halloo awakes the castle. Agamemnon is coming.

There is a pause, in which the Watchman disappears and day breaks and broadens. Then slowly the Chorus defile upon the scene. They are elders of Argos, who had been too old for the war ten years ago, and now they lean upon staves as they go, chanting a song of their memories. It begins on a gallant marching note. ' It is now ten years since the sons of Athens set forth

to take vengeance upon Troy.' 'They were like vultures that have lost their young and wheel screaming above the empty nest. And as God heeds the cry of the wronged birds, so He sends His ministers of vengeance against Paris, who stole away the wife of his host, and neither tears nor sacrifice will avail the sinner.' Then the note saddens a little; the old men remember their age, and the martial flame dies down. 'Old men are we, going three-footed on staves, no longer fit for war, dream shapes wandering by day.'

At some juncture of this prelude, or perhaps before it began, Clytemnestra, the wife of Agamemnon, shows herself. Everyone in the audience knows at once who she is. Every imagination has been prepared by the sinister ambiguities of the Watchman, by the breaking of the great dawn after the long night, by the hopes and fears of the Chorus. This is the famous Queen who slew her husband and was slain by her son. The eyes of the theatre would be for her rather than the singers, would instinctively look for some bloody sign upon her forehead or her hands. In reading we must try to feel like that, or we shall not realize the emotion on which the poet was deliberately working. Observe his method. He lets her speak no word. The awed Chorus watch her, as we all are watching her. Silently she busies herself with preparations for sacrifice. The Elders address her reverentially. 'What means all this blaze of sacrifice? What news has come? We are shaken by alternate hope and fear.' She makes no answer. Like a ghost, like a silent menace she comes; like a ghost she departs.

The old men resume their chant, but in a more

doubtful strain, marked by a different metre. 'An omen crossed the path of the Kings on their way to war.' There appeared two eagles tearing a she-hare great with young. (*Cry woe*, comes the refrain, *but may the good prevail!*) The prophet Calchas knew in the birds the two leaders of the host, and spake in riddling wise: *In time this warpath taketh Troy, and she shall be violently sacked . . . let only Wrath divine not hurl in darkness that city's embattled curb*—the Greek army. *For Pity yet dwells in heaven and Artemis loathes the eagle's feast.* (*Cry woe, woe, but may the good prevail!*) *O beautiful goddess, tender even to the lion's little ones, fulfil the prayer of these Kings to slay like the eagles—although, alas! dread visions crowd on me of what shall come of that prayer. For there abideth a Wrath, house-haunting, unforgetting, child-avenging, terrible!* (*Cry woe, woe, but let the good prevail!*) The embodiment of that Wrath, the poet means us to understand—finally forces us to understand—is Clytemnestra.

From such thoughts the Chorus seek relief in the contemplation of an ultimate Justice. To Aeschylus, wrestling in his deep and earnest spirit with what we call the problem of evil, had one day come the thought: '*God* too has suffered, and therefore He understands. Doubtless it all happened long ago, in the childhood of the world, and now He is perfectly happy. But it was not always so. If now He is perfectly just, it is because He perfectly understands, and perfect understanding has come—it can come in no other way—through perfect suffering.' This thought seems to have come to Aeschylus, as well it might, with something of the force of a revelation. Few grander conceptions have entered

the mind of a man. In this sense the Chorus now speak. ' Zeus, whoso'er he be, if that name please him, by that I call him. I cannot, for all my painful thought, find one like him or equal to him. He has made it the law of life that *wisdom* shall only come by *suffering*, having found this true in his own case.' That the law might be fulfilled, Agamemnon bent his neck to the burden of woe that fell on him. For day after day at Aulis, where the ships were stationed, contrary winds kept blowing out of Thrace, till the host began to feel hunger and fear. Then Calchas sounded a note of dread: *It is Artemis that delays the ships, being wroth with us*. And he told the only way in which she could be appeased, the awful way—so that the Kings burst into tears and smote upon the ground with their sceptres. But Agamemnon cried: *Hard is it to slay my child, but harder to fail the host which beyond measure desires the sacrifice*. So when he had put on the yoke of ' necessity,' his spirit was changed and he became a madman. He offered up his own daughter to win a war about a woman! All her loveliness and youth and innocence could not save her. Yea, they gagged the sweet lips that no cry should mar the ritual.

' Of all that followed I speak not. But the prophesying of Calchas failed not of fulfilment. *Justice* instructs through *suffering*. Let us say no more.'

So ends the famous Chorus, the longest, the most obscure, the most beautiful in dramatic literature. All the time, in a play otherwise concentrated beyond modern example, the action from the modern point of view has been standing still. It might perhaps fairly be argued that the ode needs no other defence than its own sur-

passing quality as poetry. But Aeschylus himself would not have thought so ; nor would his Athenian audience. It has also been common, at least since John Addington Symonds, to point out that the chorus serves the purpose of ' creating an atmosphere.' Now that is true ; there is probably no drama in the world that has so much ' atmosphere ' as the *Agamemnon*, and that is largely due to this particular lyric. But the greatest dramatic art should be capable of creating atmosphere in the very process of developing the action. Such is the art of Shakespeare in (say) *Macbeth* or *Antony and Cleopatra*. Even the lesser Elizabethans often seem to have it, when construction and even common sense appear to have deserted them. We must apply, then, this test to the *Agamemnon*. The great ode is almost unequalled poetry, it creates atmosphere, it builds up the philosophy of the play. But is it good Drama ?

The answer to that question was adumbrated in the contrast outlined between the ancient and the modern methods of treating in Drama an event like the death of Charles I. Perhaps one need only add a touch or two drawn particularly from the *Agamemnon*. After so much said about the lyrical qualities of the first ode, it is easy to forget that, after all, it tells a story. We do not expect that of a modern lyric, and if we get it we are apt to think that the story scarcely matters. Very often it does not seriously matter. But that is not true of the Greek choric ode—above all it is not true of this particular ode of the *Agamemnon*. The story there is all-important. True, it is not told in a forthright way, but in an elaborately enigmatic, allusive and oracular speech. Let us not be deceived by that. Aeschylus

adopts this manner of narrative for reasons of which one is the simplest possible. The audience knows the story already. It would therefore be tedious and offensive to reiterate the whole matter in punctual detail. Pindar, who also follows the allusive method, must have had the same motive, since nothing could have been more familiar to the local audiences he addressed than the glories and exploits of their local heroes. But poets so great as Pindar and Aeschylus can turn a hindrance into a help. They devised an art of lyrical narrative which made use of the very knowledge of their hearers. They dealt in hint and allusion, the whole force of which depended on the familiarity of the tale which they were handling. Their style became in the highest degree *suggestive*, and the power of such a style in the hands of a master is one of the most impressive things in the history of literature. The effect is not merely to create an atmosphere ; it is to reawaken a slumbering emotion of the most potent and vibrating quality. Does that seem exaggerated language to describe the result of recalling an old story ? Well, no doubt all depends on the story and the manner of its telling. As for our ode, after all the purpose of a play is to interest us in a situation. All the ' action ' in the world can do no more than that. Now if we put ourselves in the place of Aeschylus' auditors, thrilling with the foreknowledge of the doom awaiting Agamemnon, would not this relentless, yet as it were secret, plucking at the chords of memory interest us in the situation ? This Chorus is chanting the death-warrant of its King. To crave for ' action ' here is to be stupid.

Meanwhile (to resume our analysis) Clytemnestra has

reappeared, and the Chorus, speaking as usual through their Leader, again ask the meaning of her preparations. This time she answers, 'The Greeks have taken Troy.' 'What messenger has brought the news?' 'The God of Fire,' replies the Queen; and how the signal sped from beacon to beacon is described in a speech whose splendour itself resembles leaping fire in the night. But this is immediately followed by a speech of equal imaginative force but of quite a different tone, brooding with an almost cruel intensity upon the scenes that must be happening in Troy—the sack of a great city. The closing words are something between a threat and a prayer—a dark surmise that the dead may have some sudden blow in reserve. 'The dead'; she uses the ambiguous plural, so that the Chorus will suppose she is thinking of the slaughtered Trojans. But the audience divines that she is thinking of her murdered child. The Irony, which has been flashing all over the sky, appears for one startling moment to strike the house.

The Queen leaves the stage, and the Chorus, free from the embarrassment of her presence, uplift their voices in a song of gratitude for the triumph of the Greek cause, which is also in this case the cause of Justice. They state in their grave sententious way their form of the traditional popular theology. 'The Proud Man is tempted into Sin, and then God blasts him. Such has been the fate of Paris and his city—Paris who sinned against Heaven when he betrayed his host.' Then these old men, in words of infinite beauty, sing of Helen's flight with her lover and the grief of Menelaus left desolate. And from that their strain saddens more and more. 'War followed her flight, war

which brought back ashes for men and for loyalty murmuring against the rulers. Yea, God forgets not the many slain. Better to live unenvied than be uplifted into towering station; for the thunderbolt of Zeus is hurled upon the high.'

Extraordinary how that idea recurs! But it is the root of the antique tragic mood. So heavily does the thought weigh upon the Chorus that they begin even to doubt the truth of what they have heard. With women the wish is so often father to the thought! Then they catch sight of a dusty Herald arriving. 'Now we shall hear what has really happened.' The Herald begins with a greeting to the gods of his native land, followed by a somewhat boastful and self-righteous proclamation of victory (the audience in the theatre knowing all the time what the 'victory' was to end in). The Elders ply him with closer questions. He gives what is currently called a realistic description of the miseries of the army before Troy—then superstitiously checks himself. 'All that is past. We may now rejoice and praise the gods.'—*All that is past!*

At this point Clytemnestra returns from the palace. Seeing the Herald, she flings at the Chorus a few words of scorn for having doubted her. Then she bids him convey to his lord and hers a message of welcome of such concentrated and sinister Irony that (although only the audience can perceive its full import) it seems to leave both Herald and Chorus speechless. At any rate they have nothing to say, and she, scorning to question the messenger, leaves him to the curiosity of the old men. He tells of the great storm which had scattered the returning fleet, and wrecked and drowned so many,

and separated Menelaus from his brother. To this dirge-like note has the exultation of his opening speech been subdued.

The Chorus sing again. This time their theme is Helen, the half-divine woman, the 'heart-stabbing flower of love,' who has a kind of symbolic value for them, even her name possessing a magical import. 'She was like the young lion which the herdsman reared as a pet amid the flocks, till one day its inborn savagery awoke and it made a great slaughter of the sheep. It is an old saying'—the old doctrine of the Divine Envy—'that good fortune breeds misery. But I'—the Leader of the Chorus, speaking for the rest—'believe against all the world that it is Sin that breeds Sin and Insolence (*Hubris*) that breeds Insolence, and that the house of the righteous always prospers. Justice shines in the smoky hut of the poor righteous man and averts her eyes from the palace of the proud.'

At last enters, whom all have been looking for, Agamemnon. He comes riding in a chariot and is accompanied by a retinue of his soldiers. Behind him is another chariot containing Cassandra, the captive Trojan princess, the prophetess, the daughter of Priam. The Elders address the King in words of reverent welcome. Clytemnestra appears on the threshold of the palace. Agamemnon speaks. He begins like the Herald with a prayer to the gods of Argos. But almost immediately he assumes that tone of the victor so well known to the ancient Greeks, who had a moral dread of it rooted like an instinct. 'I have triumphantly crushed my enemies. But I am convinced there are many who still dislike and envy me. Let them beware!'

Observe the dramatic effectiveness of that. It is not only Ironical, it leaves us cold and a little hostile to the speaker, while at the same time the task of Clytemnestra has become doubly difficult, since here is obviously no easy unsuspicious victim. We are now prepared at least to listen to her, a thing we were scarcely willing to do before. At first, and naturally, her speech is involved and hesitating. It is further to be remembered that she has a new lover and means to murder the man she is addressing. It does not require any special acquaintance with morbid psychology but only a little knowledge of human nature to feel, as I think Aeschylus means us to feel, that her loathing for Agamemnon has an almost hysterical character. She never lets him touch her. Her first words are strange and almost silly. She tells how hard it is for a wife who is left alone in the house waiting for news about her husband. This is a just complaint, and was doubtless sincerely made even by Clytemnestra. But she goes on to remark that, if the King has been wounded as often as people said, he must be as full of holes as a net! Not an agreeable sort of remark—' not natural and not nice '—with which to greet a ten years absent husband. But it is hysteria, or on the verge of it. Then she involves herself in studied, elaborate compliments, or rather flatteries, very fluent and very unconvincing. From these she comes to the explanation she has been dreading most. Why is Orestes, their son, not present to welcome his father? Well, she was advised that there was danger of a popular rising, so she sent the heir out of danger to their good friend Strophius of Phocis. Then she speaks of her lonely fears in the night; then tries a

new appeal—admiring love for such a splendid husband. That tells, only too obviously. Now she has his soul in her net! Let her only flatter him into some action which cannot but offend the gods, who are watching all the time with jealous eye their almost equal, and she has *them* on her side. The means she has already provided, namely rolls of purple cloth. (Ancient purple was an almost blood-red colour.) She prays the King 'to tread the purple path' into his house. For purple was also the colour of kings.

The proposal at first startles Agamemnon. All that ancient superstition about the consequences of blazing one's prosperity in the face of Heaven stirs in his breast. But what he cannot face is the suggestion in his wife's smile that he is afraid. So he compromises. He has his feet bared as a sign of humility, and so, with a prayer on his lips that the Envy of the Gods may not smite him from afar, he treads the purple. And as he enters, Clytemnestra has her prayer too ('O God, fulfil it!'). Then she follows him into the castle.

The astonishing *power* of Aeschylus—that power which, as we happen to know, put his audiences almost beside themselves with pity and terror—can be fully realized only by prolonged and detailed study of the original. But even without this an imaginative reader may be seized with something of that power. Here is an extraordinary instance of it. All this time (we are at line 974) nothing has happened. The action of the play begins, properly speaking, with the treading of the purple by Agamemnon. It may seem impossible to conduct a drama on such a principle without weakening, or rather destroying, the interest. Yet here it is done.

I can think of no other way of doing it than the method employed, making us hear more and more distinctly the rumble of approaching doom.

You might suppose that now at least the method had exhausted its resources. By no means. It only reaches its climax in the scene that follows—the most wonderful in the *Agamemnon* and perhaps in any drama.

When the King enters the house he leaves Cassandra behind him with an order to show her kindness. Clytemnestra has made up her mind that Cassandra too must die, for the daughter of Priam is clearly a rival, and may be dangerous. But in the meantime the Queen has left the stage, which we must now imagine empty of all save the old men of the Chorus and the captive foreign woman, who had seen all her sad prophecies come true. While she remains silent and motionless in the chariot, the Chorus break into low song, whose burden is wonder why, instead of gladness, a strange foreboding haunts them. No doubt the treading of the purple had disquietened them, although respect for the King would forbid their saying so. The old fear recurs. 'It is wiser to sacrifice something to appease the gods.'

As they end their ode, the Queen comes forth from the palace. With ill-concealed hatred she bids Cassandra enter. Cassandra makes no answer, perhaps does not hear her. The Leader of the Chorus now speaks to her in gentle tones. Neither does he get an answer. Alternately the Queen and he address the stranger in threatening and in pitying words. Still Cassandra maintains her brooding silence. Clytemnestra at last, in a rage of impatience, departs into the house. Now this silence is dramatically effective; even the dullest must

feel that. But what in the mind of the audience multiplied the effectiveness was the knowledge that Cassandra was a prophetess. If she does not answer the other woman, it is because she is seeing figures, hearing voices, not of this world.

Left alone with the sympathetic Chorus, she gives utterance to the vision that breaks upon her. It does not break all at once, but by glimpses and flashes that only gradually assemble themselves into a coherent picture. At first come mere cries of horror and undefined fear. Then in strange broken images she outlines, as if with a pencil of fire, vanishing dreadful things in the dark: forms of murdered children (the ghosts of those eaten by their own father in this accursed House of Atreus) stretching out hands full of their own flesh—forms at last of a woman, and a man, and a bath—the man in the bath—the woman, the man's wife, raining blows upon him. Last comes the vision of her own dead body. . . . After this she grows calmer and reasons with the Elders about herself, her gift of prophecy, the certainty that there will happen . . . what? She tries to explain, to describe it all exactly, and the old men come nearer and nearer to understanding and belief. But they never quite believe. So with a last word of pity, not for herself but for human life, she enters the house, knowing well what will there befall her.

The use which Aeschylus makes of Cassandra's gift of prophecy to let us see through her eyes the bodily horror of the coming murder is a stroke of genius which it were as idle to praise as to praise the poetry of the whole episode. But one may say that, if it were not for the poetry—the sheer beauty of it, 'the amazement

and the pathos,' which the old *Argument* speaks of—the suspense, the listening for the death-cry from the house, would be almost intolerable. When the cry does come, it comes from Agamemnon, not from Cassandra. Life was over for her before she entered the house of her enemies. It is the *Argument* again which remarks this, and it is a good remark.

It would perhaps be tedious to carry this analysis of the *Agamemnon* farther. Enough, I hope, has been said to illustrate the method of Aeschylus, the true inventor of Tragedy. What, then, in brief is this method? Is it not, by playing at every point, by every art, upon the contrast between the knowledge of the spectator and the ignorance of the agonists, to drive home the Irony of the situation?

VI

When one considers the uniqueness of Greek Tragedy, a form of art in many ways of the most elaborate conventionality, so that at first sight, with their episodes and choruses, their strophes and antistrophes, all such plays look very much alike, it is remarkable how widely the great Greek tragic poets differ from one another. The difference is perhaps specially evident between Aeschylus and Sophocles, more evident at least to myself than the difference between Aeschylus and Euripides, or even between Euripides and Sophocles. I find in both the eldest and the youngest of these three a certain intellectual daring (Aeschylus was for his time perhaps as heretical as Euripides), a certain boldness and picturesqueness in their scenic effects, a certain absence of that serenity usually, and no doubt rightly, considered to be characteristic of the Greeks, and certainly very characteristic of Sophocles. But this is perhaps matter for a separate inquiry. It is in any case the turn of Sophocles. From his seven extant dramas I choose the *Oedipus Rex*. It is perhaps the most famous—I doubt if at the present time it is the most admired—of his plays. A modern critic is apt to think it a little stagey and mechanical. It contains no speech like the farewell speech of Aias to Tecmessa, no lyric to compare with the Colonus ode in the later *Oedipus*. Aristotle indeed admired it; but Professor A. E. Taylor says of Aristotle

in this connection: "It is clear from his repeated allusions that the play he admired above all others was the *King Oedipus* of Sophocles, but it is equally clear that he admired it not for the profound insight into human life and destiny or the deep sense of the mystery of things which some modern critics have found in it, but because its plot is the best and most startling detective story ever devised, and its finale a triumph of melodramatic horror."

It would obviously not be fair to quote against Professor Taylor a single sentence at the end of a very little and very compact book,[1] where he had no room to develop his opinion; but it is not unfair to say that, as it stands, the opinion needs defence, if only for the reason that the great majority of competent scholars undoubtedly disagree with it. Moreover, it seems to imply a conception of the nature of ancient Tragedy which, I think, is very general and believe to be mistaken. He calls the plot of the *Oedipus* a detective story, "the best and most startling detective story ever devised." That suggests—does it not?—something in the manner of Poe or Conan Doyle. The art of such writers, in their detective stories, is to involve the reader in a mystery and keep him there as long as possible. As late as their ingenuity can contrive is the mystery explained and the criminal unmasked. But in the case of the *Oedipus Rex* the audience knew before they entered the theatre what the crime was and who the criminal. It follows that the method of Sophocles must be quite different from that of Poe. It is so different that it might almost be called its opposite. The solution

[1] The volume *Aristotle* in the People's Library Series.

which Poe withholds from us Sophocles never lets us forget. There would be no harm in calling the *Oedipus* a detective story, if all this were explained ; but to call it so without qualification is to invite misunderstanding.

The best way of seeing this is to take up the play itself.

The opening scene is of a kind very common in Greek Tragedy. A group is discovered in suppliant attitudes about an altar which stands before a palace. It is the palace of Oedipus in Thebes. The suppliants are children, young men and old ; their leader an aged priest. As they kneel Oedipus comes among them.

He was the son of Laïus, his predecessor on the throne of Thebes, and Iocasta. To these had come an oracle from Apollo in Delphi warning the royal pair that a son of theirs should kill his father and marry his mother. Therefore when a man-child was born to him, Laïus had him cast out to die on Mount Cithaeron, the lonely and lofty range of forest land that parts Attica from Boeotia. The herdsman, to whom the child was delivered, out of pity—it is the old story, much older than any history and as widespread as humanity—rescued him and gave him to a fellow-shepherd from Corinth, who was returning thither. The childless King and Queen of Corinth, Polybus and Merope, adopted the foundling as their son and named him Oedipus. The child grew up to manhood there in Corinth in ignorance of his true origin. Then one day in a quarrel—the ' flaw ' in the character of Oedipus as of Lear is a proneness to violent explosions of anger—a man taunted him with his unknown birth. The taunt rankling in his mind, Oedipus besought Polybus and Merope to tell

him the truth. They were enraged against the insulter, but did not directly answer the young man's question. Dissatisfied, he turned to the great oracle at Delphi. On his journey thither from Corinth, at a wild place where three roads met, he encountered Laïus in a chariot with some five attendants. By one of these Oedipus was jostled and, retaliating, was struck by the old King. Thereupon with a blow of his staff the Prince of Corinth slew Laïus, and then, one against five, killed all the attendants but one.

Later he had come to Thebes, which he found disordered for lack of a ruler and plagued by the Sphinx, who rent and devoured all who could not answer her riddle. Oedipus answered it, whereupon she killed herself. The city hailed him as her deliverer, and when (as primitive custom required) he married Iocasta, accepted him as King. With her he lived many years, and there were children, two sons and two daughters. Oedipus had proved himself a great and beloved King, and all this time 'God had not said a word.' But now a mysterious plague was destroying the people.

This, or the essentials of this, the audience knew when the play began. All eyes would be turned upon Oedipus, now at the height of his power and glory. He was a *Basileus*, a figure strange to modern notions, originally combining something of the priest, and even the god, with his more secular functions. But the Oedipus of Sophocles is no god ; he is something much more human and tragic. When he questions the suppliants, the old priest, after describing the ravages of the pest, says : *Not as equalling thee to gods do these children and I pay thee reverence at the altar, but as judging thee our foremost man in the*

chances of life and commerce with the divine. It is on these grounds that he appeals to Oedipus to save the State.

The King replies in a speech at once noble and touching. He has not been careless or idle during this agony of Thebes. He has sent Creon, his wife's brother, to seek advice of the Oracle. Even as he speaks, Creon is descried, and presently comes on the stage with cheerful looks and garlanded as a sign of happy tidings. From this point begins the main 'action,' whose development has given the *Oedipus* its extraordinary reputation as a piece of stage-craft. But the interest of the technique has tended to divert us from more important matters. It is fatal to read the play, as Professor Taylor charges the author of the *Poetics* with doing, as a mere detective story. The main interest of the *Oedipus*, apart from its poetry, lies in what Aristotle calls *ethopoïia*, the representation of character. Most important of all no doubt for a Greek tragedy, as the great critic insists and as my whole argument assumes, is the proper choice of a subject, which will be one already known and approved. But, although plot alone will make a play, it will not alone make a good play. To make it good there is necessary, even more than style, excellence in *ethopoïia*. Now in the *Oedipus* the skill with which the truth is gradually revealed is indeed beyond praise. But it is the effect of these revelations on the characters in which consists the real power of the play. Who has time to reflect on the ingenuity of the plot when his mind is thrilled with that Tragic Irony which Sophocles, with stroke upon stroke, never ceases to enforce? The plot is but a means to that end.

Creon reports that his news is both good and bad. Shall he declare it before the people or privately to the King? 'Tell it to all,' says Oedipus. 'I am more concerned for them than for myself.' 'Apollo bids us drive out the pollution from our land by death or banishment of the guilty.' 'The guilty—who is he?' That question, of course, strikes the Ironical note at once; as the drama proceeds, it is to be stressed more and more. 'Before you Laïus was King.' 'I know it by hearsay; I never saw him.' 'It is his death we are bidden to avenge.' 'How shall we discover the sinner?' 'The god said he was in our midst.' 'Where was Laïus slain?' 'Upon a sacred journey.' 'Were there no witnesses to the slaying?' 'One only, and his tale was that brigands did the deed.' 'No brigand would have dared, had he not been bribed.' 'So people thought, but the trouble of the Sphinx coming upon us, the matter was allowed to sleep.' Oedipus solemnly undertakes to drive the pollution from the State. It is his duty to himself; it is his duty to his predecessor. Meanwhile the whole people of Thebes is to assemble before the palace.

The Chorus, left alone, sing an ode of supplication to all the gods of the land, invoking their aid against the Fiend which is Pestilence. The King returns, and, speaking to the now assembled Thebans, reiterates his intention of discovering and expelling the criminal. This long speech, like the preceding shorter one, is, as anyone may see who does no more than read between the lines of a synopsis, from beginning to end unbroken Irony. Oedipus begins with the remark that he labours under the disadvantage of being a foreigner unacquainted

with the late monarch and the circumstances of his death. He therefore invites information from anyone who is in the position to give it. If the guilty man will confess, his sole punishment will be to leave the country. If any man knows the sinner, let him speak and merit both reward and gratitude. If for any reason he will not speak, he is now solemnly excommunicated. The State is bound by every consideration of honour and duty to sift the matter to the bottom, and especially is the King so bound. Lastly, on the criminal a great and terrible curse is imprecated. There is something perhaps a little obvious in these effects, although from the dramatic point of view there is no harm in that. The ' pity ' and the ' terror ' of them are wonderful.

None possessing any useful information, Oedipus is at a loss how to begin his inquisition. The suggestion is made to send for Teiresias, the blind prophet of Apollo. That also (replies the King) was thought on, and Creon sent to fetch the seer. In a little Teiresias arrives, guided by a child. Oedipus addresses the blind old man, who had outlived all his generation, who was older than Thebes itself, of which the whole unhappy history, past and to come, glowed like a picture in his prophetic mind. In words of reverence and appeal he addresses him : ' We are in thy hands ; help us, save us. To help his fellow is the noblest thing a man may do.'

Teiresias is deeply moved. He sighs over the unprofitableness of a wisdom which did not forbid his coming. When Oedipus asks the reason of this despondency, he prays to be sent home again. The King protests against this refusal of aid, and then, Teiresias remaining obdurate, condescends to join with his subjects

in humble supplication to the prophet. The old man explains that he is merely unwilling to declare the evil that threatens Oedipus. 'What!' cries the King, 'do you know the truth and still refuse to help us?' 'I would not cause you pain.' At this the passionate temper of Oedipus flames out, not, you may perceive, ignobly and not without apparent justification. Teiresias he calls the most heartless and contemptible of men. The prophet retorts that Oedipus is forgetting the flaw in his own temper, and persists in his refusal to speak. The King (unjustifiably now and in one of his rages) suggests that Teiresias had something to do with the murder himself. But it is not easy to beat an aged prophet at irascibility, and Teiresias now lets himself go. He roundly accuses Oedipus of being the polluter of the land. It is one of the Ironies of the play that this seems to everyone a monstrous accusation. The violent quarrel that follows is not the sort of thing that calls for analysis. Its chief importance is in the light it throws upon that proud, vehement, sensitive nature of Oedipus. Anger breeding suspicion, he at once concludes that Teiresias has been bribed by the ambition of Creon. The old man replies with a prophecy of what awaits the King, every word of which the audience would dreadfully anticipate in fulfilment, as the picture unrolled itself of a blind accursed beggar in the rent garments of royalty stumbling along the roads of banishment.

After a choric ode most powerfully depicting the doom of the hunted sinner, but expressly acquitting Oedipus, Creon appears in haste. He has heard of the King's charge and is passionate to deny it. While he speaks with the Chorus, Oedipus comes again from the palace,

and at the first sight of Creon breaks out in fresh condemnations. It should be remembered that the King, believing himself innocent, can only explain the charge of Teiresias on the theory of conspiracy. Not only so, but there is much, as the accused man himself is drawn to admit, to connect Creon with Teiresias. Oedipus has reached the point of threatening his wife's brother with death, when that wife herself appears. This is Iocasta; the very name had for an ancient audience a nightmare sound. Unhappiest, most ambiguous among women, upon her Sophocles has spent the best of his subtle art. She has great force both of mind and character. One feels this at once; for when she intervenes between the two angry men it is exactly in the way a mother intervenes between quarrelling children, and, like children, the men give up their quarrel at once, although Creon exhibits, at the risk of his life, an almost comic determination to have the last word. Having got it, he makes his escape.

Oedipus can now unburden his heart to Iocasta. 'They charge me with the murder of Laïus.' Out of her love and her indignation at this she makes up her mind to tell him the gnawing secret of her old life. It is the story of the oracle that came to Laïus and the exposure of the babe. She implies that it was Laïus who pierced the baby's feet and cast it out to die upon the mountain. The whole truth was still too hard to tell—that it was she, the new mother, who herself did this thing. That comes out later in the play. And, after all, the confession, so painful to the proud woman that all these years she has not made it to the man she loves—thereby creating fresh wonder in the minds of

some critics—does not help him in the least, but in fact destroys him. Let Oedipus, she cries, now dismiss from his mind all regard for prophets! The prophets said Laïus would be slain by his son. He was killed by brigands at a place where three roads meet. 'Where three roads meet?' he echoes. Then: 'When did Laïus die?' 'A little before your coming.' 'What was he like?' 'A white-haired man, in form not very unlike yourself.' 'Did he set out with many or few attendants?' 'With five in all.' 'Who reported this tale?' 'A servant of the palace, the sole survivor.' 'Is he within?' 'No. When he saw you on the throne of Laïus, he besought me to send him into the country. He had been faithful, and I granted his request.' 'Can he be brought here?' 'Yes. But, my lord, I have the right to know the cause of your distress.'

It is now the turn of Oedipus for confession. He tells the story of his life in Corinth, and of his encounter with an old man, answering to the description of Laïus, whom he slew at the cross-roads. One hope remains; the report runs that the old King was slain by brigands. 'Not only I am witness to that,' says Iocasta, 'but the whole city. Moreover, the prophecy said he should be killed by his own son and mine. That son died long ago. Thus the oracle is proved false in any case. As for the prophet's art, after this I laugh at it!' Because of the child, dead (as she supposed) so long ago. It is not hard to understand the scepticism of Iocasta; nor the almost too cruel Irony of this passage. It is a strange 'detective story' we are reading.

The King and Queen withdraw to the palace. The Chorus, troubled apparently by the 'impiety' of Iocasta,

sing of the Eternal Laws that are above all human law, and of the power and majesty of oracles, now mocked of some. To them returns Iocasta bearing fillets and incense for sacrifice. (Her rationalism, one sees, is not quite thorough-going.) She is doing this because she is frightened by the terrible excitement of Oedipus. She makes her prayer to Apollo that the god may cleanse away this mist of an unholy doubt. " For all we look on him," on Oedipus, " as the pilot of the ship."

To her thus speaking enters a Messenger, who asks for Oedipus. " He is within," says the Chorus, " but this is his wife . . . and mother . . . of his children." (This verbal ' Sophoclean Irony,' effective in its way, is really the most mechanical form which the poet's Irony takes.) The Messenger tells Iocasta that he brings good tidings from Corinth. King Polybus is dead and the Corinthians desire Oedipus to succeed him. Joyfully she summons her husband, who questions the Messenger. Satisfied that his father is dead, the King, like Iocasta before, exclaims upon the fallaciousness of signs and prophecies. This is *Hubris*, defying the gods : *Nemesis* follows instantly. Oedipus remarks that he has still to fear the oracle about his mother. Iocasta says such fears would make life impossible.—And then the Messenger intervenes.

He learns that it is of Merope they are speaking, and he hears the oracle. ' You may dismiss all these terrors,' says he ; ' Polybus and Merope were not your father and mother.' From this point, as one might expect, the dialogue acquires a terrible speed and intensity. ' If Polybus was not my father, how did he come to call me his son ? ' ' He received you from my hands.' ' Did

he love so much what came from a stranger's hands?' 'He had no child of his own.' 'Did you buy me or find me?' So the question stands, simple like that, and it is as simply answered. 'I found you in a dell of Cithaeron.' 'How came you there?' 'I was in charge of our mountain flocks.' 'Were you a shepherd?' 'Yes, and your saviour, my son.' 'In what peril did you find me?' 'Your feet can witness to that.' 'Alas! what old affliction is this you speak of?' 'I loosed you from your piercing fetters.' 'Ah, shameful swaddling-bands!' 'Thus got you your name,' *Oedipus*, which Greek etymology derived from *oideîn*, to swell, and *pous*, the foot. 'Was it yourself that found me?' 'Nay, another gave you to me.' 'Who?' 'I think he was of the slaves of Laïus.' 'The former King of this land?' 'He; and my man was his herdsman.' 'Does he still live?' 'You Thebans know that best.'

Oedipus turns to the assembled folk. 'Does any here know this man?' The answer, by the lips of the Chorus Leader, is: 'We think he can be none other than the man you have already summoned. But the Queen should know.' Iocasta has, of course, already divined the truth. It is such that one might expect her to cry out on the mountains to cover her, or even to go suddenly mad. If Aristotle really preferred 'triumphs of melodramatic horror,' he must have felt that here Sophocles was missing his chance. For the first thought of Sophocles' Iocasta is for Oedipus. She parries his question and tries to divert him from his purpose. *Enough that I am suffering*, she adds gently, but in a form of words which may equally well mean "I am suffer-

ing enough." Oedipus takes the second meaning. He thinks she is afraid that he may turn out some low-born fellow, and the pride of the man is touched. He insists on seeing the herdsman. When she says " I am advising you for the best," he replies that he does not like her best. When she prays at last that he may never know who he is, he does not answer her, but breaks out with: " Will not somebody fetch the herdsman here? And let the lady find satisfaction in her rich relations! "

There is something maternal in the love of Iocasta for Oedipus. I will not call that a stroke of Tragic Irony, for this or any other description must sound totally inadequate for a touch so daring, so piteous and, as Sophocles produces it, so beautiful and true. She does not even now think of justifying herself, for that would rob Oedipus of the few moments of only comparative unhappiness standing between him and his discovery of the truth. Thus, misunderstood by the one human being on whose love she might have counted, she turns away in silence. Her last wish—that he might be spared the knowledge that was killing her—being denied, what more was there to say? Iocasta at least could think of nothing more.

The Chorus, seeing her hasten away, are sorry for her and a little afraid of what may be the consequence. (It was, in fact, her suicide.) But Oedipus can see in her emotion nothing but shame at his humble birth, and somewhat grandiloquently acclaims himself the " Child of Fortune." Whereupon, in a brief ode suggested by these last words of the King, the Chorus chant their conviction that his father is some god and his mother some nymph of the mountains. It is the way of Sophocles

to put a confident little song in this place of a drama, just before the catastrophe. It has, of course, a clear Ironical value.

The long-expected Herdsman is now seen approaching. As the old man draws nigh the King addresses him: 'Were you the servant of Laïus?' 'Yes.' 'What was your office?' 'Chiefly, to follow his flocks.' 'Where was your main grazing-ground?' 'Cithaeron and its neighbourhood.' 'Do you know this man?' Oedipus points to the Messenger, and the old man turns his eyes upon the Corinthian stranger. A dramatic moment, which the famous skill of the poet knows well how to use, protracting it a little longer. 'For the moment I do not remember him.' The Messenger interposes: 'That is not strange, our acquaintance was so long ago'; and adds some details which recall him to the memory of the Herdsman. 'You know, then,' he proceeds, 'that you gave me a child at that time to bring up.' 'Why do you ask?' 'Because that child is now the King.' The appalled Herdsman with a threatening gesture calls upon the Messenger to hold his peace. 'Not so,' interrupts Oedipus; 'it is thou that needest chastisement.' 'What is my offence?' 'That thou answerest not his question concerning the child.' 'He does not know what he is saying.'

When the tormented Oedipus at last threatens violence the Herdsman's resolution breaks. 'I gave the child. Would I had died that day!' 'Was it your own, or did you receive it from another?' 'From another I received it.' 'From whom?' 'For the love of God, O my master, question me no more!' 'You are dead if I must ask again.' 'It was a child from the house of

Laïus.' 'His own or a slave?' 'Ah me, I have come to the very fearful place of speaking!' 'And I of hearing; yet hear I must.' 'He was called the son of Laïus. But your wife can best tell you the truth.' 'Was she the giver?' 'Yea, O King.' 'Unto what service of thine?' 'That I should destroy him.' 'The unhappy mother? . . .' 'Even so. It was from fear of evil prophecies.' 'Of what sort?' 'The saying was that the son should slay his father.' 'Why then did you yield him up to this man here?' 'Out of pity, my lord, thinking he would carry the child to another country. . . . But he only saved him for extreme disaster. For if thou art the man he says, evil-starred art thou indeed. . . .'

Then a great cry breaks from Oedipus. 'I see it all. I have fulfilled at every point the whole prophecy.' And he rushes into 'that unhappy palace of his race.'

What follows is just the completion of doom. A second Messenger bursts upon the stage with a tale of Iocasta found hanging dead and the self-blinding of Oedipus, who in his last words to the Chorus had prayed to see the light no more. In Shakespeare the eyes of Lear are torn out before the gaze of the spectators. The Greek convention and Greek taste forbade this. Nevertheless, I suppose it must be the scene where the blinded King comes for the last time from his house and in the stately manner of Greek Tragedy laments his destiny—it must be this scene which Professor Taylor calls a triumph of melodramatic horror. What I think really is rather horrible is the manner in which Oedipus harps upon the complications of incest. Yet doubtless even that is psychologically true, while it is just the lack of

this truth to Nature which has given melodrama its bad reputation.

The method of Aeschylus in the *Agamemnon* is to keep things, the expected things, as long as possible from happening. The method of Sophocles in the *Oedipus Rex* is to make them happen from the very beginning of the play, one thing leading inevitably to another, slowly at first, but with gradually increasing speed, like a river coming to a waterfall. Aeschylus hangs a sword by a hair; when it falls it destroys at a stroke. Sophocles keeps smiting with increasing force, blow upon blow. But the sword is the same for both. It is the sword of *Irony*.

VII

a

Of Euripides we may say that he is the most debatable among poets. Yet some of the reasons that make him so are not peculiar to him ; they only apply to him with peculiar force. We might see this more clearly if we possessed as many plays of the two older dramatists as we do of Euripides. Still, we have enough to judge by. People say, for example, and say truly, that Euripides is very apt to be unsympathetic in his presentation of the gods. Yet what about Aeschylus in the *Prometheus Bound* ? What about the Athena of Sophocles' *Ajax* ? Again, Euripides is famous for his sympathetic studies of ' bad ' women. But there is the Clytemnestra of the *Agamemnon*, and there is the Iocasta of the *Oedipus*. It is then up to a point true to say that the third of the great dramatists was merely continuing the tradition of his predecessors.

Now that is an important matter, all the more important because we are dealing with one of the most original of men. There is no denying his originality, but it is not at all easy to say in what exactly it consists. A large part of it does undoubtedly consist in the intensification of a kind of originality common to Greek literature and in particular to the Athenian Dramatists. I could not pretend to go into all that here with any thoroughness. But in dealing with Euripides something has to be said

about it. So many misconceptions still require to be uprooted. One of these—the most important for ancient Drama—concerns religion. We can make nothing of Sophocles or Euripides, nothing even of Plato or Plotinus, if we think of them as Christians failing to live up to their creed or to get their theology properly expressed. It may seem idle of me to write like this, idle to pretend that any intelligent person does suppose that Euripides was a Christian. Put the matter like that, and, of course, everybody will deny that he supposes any such thing. But if, as Browning says, it is very hard to be a Christian, it seems at least equally hard for a Christian to forget that he is one ; and often, without knowing it, he will make Euripides one too. And so that poet, who was evidently far less satisfied with his gods than those moderns who censure him, gets called, if not exactly an ' infidel,' yet names that appear to mean much the same thing. And Iocasta in the play is seriously admonished when she cries out against the prophecies which have made her life a hell, and when, to comfort Oedipus, she bids him live without thought of this or that. It is hard to understand why it should be thought necessary to defend Apollo and his oracles against a woman who displayed so Christian a contempt for them. But I suppose the answer to that would be that the dramatic critic must put himself at the point of view of the dramatist, or rather of the character as represented by the dramatist. Sophocles, it would be said, meant Iocasta to be impious, and we must accept her as that. Very well ; but let us be sure first what we mean by impiety. Ancient impiety is quite a different thing from what we mean by the word, and critics too often forget or confuse the differ-

ence. For the average ancient man piety consisted in believing in the gods and propitiating them with the appropriate ceremonies and sacrifices. To believe in the goodness of God was not an essential tenet in his creed at all. Consequently he did not greatly care what people said *about* the gods, so long as they did not deny their existence or their power. Of course, a Plato or an Aristotle may raise the point of the divine omnipotence or omniscience. But the Dramatists were not writing for the philosopher; they were writing for the average Athenian, for whom the important question was the practical, not the moral, one. He wanted to have the gods on his side. Of course, he could not expect to win over all the gods—for instance, the deities worshipped by foreigners or enemies—so the gods he really cared about were those of his house, his parish, his city. To deny these made him seriously angry; to hint that they had been superseded by better and stronger powers was to make him furious.

That roughly was the attitude to religion of the ordinary ancient man. It did not prevent him from being on the whole no worse, or not greatly worse, in practice than the average man of to-day; but I am not defending it. I merely wish to point out that Aeschylus and the rest had to deal with it, and that their dealings are unintelligible if you do not see what it is. People write essays about the religion of Aeschylus and the like. Now Aeschylus was certainly a deeply religious man, but that is shown rather by his failure than his success in dealing with an impossible problem. The myths which form the material of Attic Tragedy involve the assumption that the gods are envious of human prosperity. You

cannot moralize a doctrine like that. Euripides often represents it in odious colours; he was the most unpopular of the great three. Aeschylus thought he had found a solution; it is sublimely expressed, but it amounts to this, that the Ruler of the Universe had once been bad, but had latterly reformed. Sophocles neither condemned the doctrine nor defended it; he was content to state. Consequently he has always been regarded as the most 'pious' of the Dramatists. In writing this book on Irony I have thought it well to avoid that way of speech myself; but here the fact is too strong for me.

b

I cannot find that Euripides was in the least bound to believe the stories which he dramatized or to like the kind of gods who figured in them. On the other hand, although he clearly did not like the gods, no one can be sure that he did not believe the stories. It does not matter. What did matter to him was that they were generally believed. The problem of the Greek tragic poet was to a quite considerable extent that of the historical Dramatist. It was to the ordinary Greek spectator an historical fact that Clytemnestra slew Agamemnon and that Oedipus married Iocasta. Our habit of calling these stories 'myths'—which in the proper use of the word they are—is apt to make us forget this. But Aeschylus or Euripides could not forget it. How fine an edge it imparts to their Tragic Irony I have already tried in part to explain and the reader will perceive for himself. There are also some notable minor effects,

such as the use of the old castles—*historic* castles to the audience—of the Pelopids or the Sons of Labdacus. It would, for instance, be hardly more paradoxical to say of the palace in the *Agamemnon* than of Egdon Heath in Mr. Hardy's novel that it is the chief character in the piece. It would be pleasant to develop such points, but they fall rather outside my thesis. To this I revert by reaffirming that to Euripides as a dramatist the credibility of the stories which he wrought into plays was comparatively of no importance. The important thing was how he should present them to people who did believe.

His plays, it is true, are full of speculations of such a kind that there is much apparent reason for calling him 'Euripides the Rationalist.'[1] Yet he was certainly not merely a rationalist any more than he was purely a mystic. He was both these things and many more; he could not have written his plays otherwise. I should think it as hard to label Euripides with one ticket as Shakespeare. He was, above all and before all, a Dramatist, whose business it is to play upon his audience as upon an instrument. Euripides certainly succeeded in this, even if the result was violent irritation. Very likely he deliberately provoked this irritation. He knew what the ordinary Athenian liked and believed, and he undoubtedly hated a great deal of it. To call him an unbeliever on that account is the silliest kind of prejudice. It would be strange if he did not have his own beliefs and if these were not better than what he attacked. When, for instance, he produced his *Ion*, which shows the Apollo of that particular legend in a peculiarly hateful

[1] See the book with this title by A. W. Verrall.

light, it does not follow that he disbelieved in Apollo, still less that he rejected all gods whatsoever. I do not know, but I can imagine him saying: "This is what I think of the Apollo in the story of Ion. If you like him, it is more than I do. My Apollo is a very different divinity." That at least is a very natural point of view. Exactly the same kind of thing is constantly being said by Socrates in the *Dialogues* of Plato. It had been said before either him or Euripides by Pindar, and before Pindar by sundry philosophers. People did not think there was any impiety in that. The wickedness came in when you denied the existence of Apollo or introduced a god of your own. With this in view it is perhaps not without significance that, although Euripides was for long a far more unpopular man than Socrates, he was never that we know of prosecuted for impiety. What Aristophanes says is not evidence.

Nevertheless, it can happen to very few not to feel, in reading Euripides after Aeschylus and Sophocles, that here is something different. It is easier to have this conviction than to explain the grounds for it. What was it that Euripides brought into literature? It might, as I have already suggested, be difficult to prove that it was anything entirely new. (The brand-new in art is what a Greek would avoid in any case.) It was rather an extension, a deepening, a subtilization of something already there. Let me put it in this way: the objective Irony of Aeschylus and Sophocles becomes in Euripides subjective. There is necessarily a certain amount of exaggeration in a statement like that. It is not true that the Irony of Aeschylus and Sophocles is always merely objective or that of Euripides never so. But as a rule

the two earlier poets are content with the old-world and world-old Irony of the Tragic Change—that reversal of fortune which Aristotle calls the *Peripeteia*. They develop the Irony inherent in the story, in the situation, with which they happen to be dealing. It may be argued that they take an Ironic view of life. I agree, if it be made clear that 'Ironic' is here used in the early meaning of the word about which I have written so much. But Euripides is Ironic in the modern sense.

How was this vital change effected? That question could be answered only by one who knew the spiritual history of a great poet of whose life we know next to nothing. We must be content to recognize that the change was made, and that to describe it we must use the word Irony in a new and (as I have ventured to say) a modern signification. This Irony is not a mood of flat disbelief or cynicism. It is "the mood of one who has some strong emotion within but will not quite trust himself on the flood of it."[1] It may be angry, bitter, contemptuous; but it will not spring from calm dislike. It shares something of that rather terrifying relation which hatred bears to love. It is, in fact, not infrequently the expression of a betrayed love which cannot quite forget the past. Even when it is light and amusing it is at its best, not when it is simple mockery, but when one divines a certain affection for the object of its attack. Nor is true Irony self-sparing any more than true humour, for then it ceases to be a genuine criticism of life, being only a criticism of other people. The deeper the feeling which it masks the more itself is the Irony.

[1] G. Murray, *Euripides and his Age*, p. 126.

c

It will not do to say that Euripides is always, in this 'Euripidean' sense, Ironical. Of that kind of Irony there is little or nothing in the *Hippolytus*, little or nothing in plays like the *Suppliants* or the *Children of Heracles*. But it is not plays of that kind—not even the *Hippolytus*—which have made Euripides so challenging a figure, but others of a different nature. Such is the *Trojan Women*.

I take it as an example, not only because it is saturated in the feeling we are now to discuss, but also because it provides an instructive contrast with Aeschylus. The earlier poet, desiring to celebrate the deliverance of Greece from Xerxes, and having to cast his subject in the mould of ancient Tragedy, solved the problem by placing the scene of his drama not in Athens, but in Susa, where the Persian King had his palace. He gives the point of view of the defeated. The *Persians*, though full of splendid, stirring poetry, though bearing on every line of it the great stamp of Aeschylus, is not perhaps in the technical sense a very good play. A Queen and a number of old men stand or move about listening to bad news. That is not a monstrously unfair description of the plot, and it is clearly not a promising recipe for play-making. The tremendous mastery of dramatic effect displayed in the Cassandra scene of the *Agamemnon* was as yet quite beyond the poet. It was indeed a fine thought, full of the future, to unroll before the eyes of the victors the tragedy of the vanquished. But the thought was not original, having been borrowed from the *Phoenician Women* of Phrynichus. Finer than the thought itself is

the spirit in which it is worked out. There is nowhere in the *Persians* one word of mockery or contempt or—what is stranger—of hate for the conquered people, 'barbarian' and Asiatic though it was. Aeschylus had risked his life and lost his brother in battle against this foe; the audience who listened to his play had seen their city and almost their all destroyed without the least prospect of 'reparations.' Yet the *Persians*, though full of gladness for the triumph of the just cause, does not insult or rage against the foreigner—nay, it shows a curiously sympathetic attempt to understand him. And the Athenian people gave it the first prize.

It is little more than a lamentation for the fall of great and ancient Persia as a notable instance of God's vengeance upon earthly pride. No doubt it was chiefly valued in antiquity, as it is valued now, for the superb description of the Battle of Salamis, grand and exciting as anything in Homer. Its philosophy of life is in appearance as simple and direct as well could be: *What mortal man shall escape the crafty deception of God?* [1] It is the old cry, so strangely persistent. No doubt it seemed to express a good enough theory of life to the audience of the *Persians*, and perhaps at that time to its poet also, although it is more probable that he was content to operate entirely with the traditional theology because, while he felt the objections to it, it had, after all, as also Sophocles and Euripides perceived, a tremendous dramatic value.

As the defeat of Xerxes was the supreme achievement of historic, so the destruction of Troy was the supreme achievement of what we should call prehistoric, Greece,

[1] *Persae*, 93 f.

To the Greeks of Euripides' time the one event was hardly more famous or more real than the other, and the triumph of Agamemnon gave them a thrill of national pride hardly less vivid than was caused by the Battle of Plataea. Euripides then takes this subject and, like Aeschylus in the *Persians*, gives in the *Trojan Women* the point of view of the vanquished. This much of resemblance exists between the plays ; to which you may add, if you please, a certain Aeschylean gorgeousness (as if the later poet had been making a special study of his predecessor) in certain portions of the *Troades*. But the difference in spirit is extraordinary. Aeschylus, whether he intended it or not, has made the Greek victory more glorious by showing of what fineness and energy the East was capable. But Euripides has made the victory over Troy appear a mean thing. He has done this by fixing upon the point in which the conquered does so often have the advantage over his conqueror—the point of moral dignity. Unhappy these Trojan women are for they suffer the extreme of what disastrous fortune can inflict. But they are not contemptible like their tormentors. Gradually it breaks upon the reader that even in the matter of unhappiness the case of the slaves may be preferred to that of the masters. Chance cannot touch these women further ; their fame will be clear in men's memories. But the Greeks have killed and ravaged only to discover, in a revulsion of disappointment and self-scorn, that they have got nothing for it but foul satisfactions and an uneasy conscience. That is Euripides' opinion of the ultimate value of the knock-out blow. There is an Irony here the modern world cannot pretend to misunderstand.

d

That is one example of the new spirit in Euripides. Shall we take another? The *Ion* has already been mentioned. It is a singular play in many ways, but we need not add to its singularities by supposing, as some have done, that the tale which it dramatizes is the invention of the poet. Not only is it quite against his habit to invent his fables, but also, if its plot is an invention, the *Ion* lays itself open to the fatal gibe of being a damp squib. There would be no sense in attacking Apollo, if Euripides based his attack on a story nobody had heard of.

The story is that Creusa, daughter of Erechtheus, the legendary King of Athens, was ravished by Apollo in a cave of the Acropolis. The god deserted her, and she bore a child in secret, leaving it in the cave in hope that its father would save it. When she returned later, it was gone. Wild birds, she thought, must have carried it off. What had really happened was this: Apollo, apparently not liking the job himself, persuaded Hermes, his good-natured brother, to convey the baby in its cradle to Delphi, the seat of the great Apolline temple, and there leave it by the sacred door. Here it was found by the Pythian priestess. Thinking it the love-child of some Delphian girl, she was about to remove it from the precincts, when pity touched her and she changed her mind. She adopted the baby, and he grew up in the temple, where at the time the play opens he is old enough to earn his living by certain ministrations about the shrine.

Meanwhile war had broken out between Athens and Euboea. A northern prince of the condottiere type

called Xuthus helped the Athenians, and was rewarded by the King with the hand of his daughter Creusa. As years went by and there was no child of the marriage, Xuthus and she resolved to visit the oracles in the hope of obtaining the promise of a son. On this pilgrimage they come to Delphi. There Xuthus receives an oracle from Apollo that the first person he shall meet in leaving the shrine is his son. He meets the temple-child, whom he wildly embraces and to whom he gives the name of Ion, *Going*, because he met him going out of the temple. Xuthus, who was later to become the father of Dorus and Achaeus, the ancestors of the Dorian and Achaean tribes, is represented as a clown, to point the contrast with the Ionians, the descendants of Ion, whose real father he was not. He has some difficulty in convincing the boy of his relationship, but at last succeeds, because (1) Apollo would not tell a lie, and (2) once in Delphi when he, Xuthus, was drunk on a holiday something had happened which might account for Ion. They agree that this must be kept from Creusa, who would be disappointed that the child was not hers too. I am telling the story as impartially as I can. What do you think of it? Now let it be remembered that the tale is a product of local patriotism. We know that Athens claimed to be the mother-city of Ionia and in virtue of that dignity to exercise some kind of authority over all Ionians. That is why Apollo, whom the Ionians worshipped as their ancestral god (*Patrôos*), is represented as the father, and Creusa, the Athenian princess, as mother of Ion. The myth had therefore a sentimental, and perhaps even a practical as well as a merely romantic, interest for the Athenians. Euripides, as is the way of him, takes it at

its face value and, as a Dramatist, tries to understand how the thing was humanly possible, to understand the feelings and the motives of all concerned. He comes to the conclusion that the villain of the piece was the god. Well now, he says to the Athenians by implication, if this is the story you pride yourselves upon, what are we to think of Apollo ?

He makes Creusa say what *she* thinks. Having discovered the deception practised upon her, she suddenly, for the moment, goes out of her mind. She speaks, or rather cries, throughout the ode I must now attempt to translate, in a heavy, clangorous, monotonous metre, like the tolling of a bell, save when her voice breaks in a burst of hurrying syllables. It is an effect which seems possible only under the metrical laws of Greek, which are quite different from ours. Yet to neglect it altogether is scarcely possible in a faithful translator, for here the rhythm to a certain extent *is* the sense. Of the poetry naturally I can catch at most the echo.

O breaking heart, it must be told,
Be told ! Yet how shall I proclaim
The sin-dimmed, secret bed of old—
A woman crying her own shame? . . .
What holds me now? Why struggle more?
No garland's here for Virtue's head !
My husband false—my father's door
Closed—my child taken from me—dead
The hope that never came to fruit
For all that anguish of desire,
Mute, though the tears were showering fire,
Of all the love and the labour, mute.

Oh by the star-deep heavenly floor,
By my own Goddess' towering seat
In Athens, by the mighty shore
Where her Tritonian waters beat,
At last shall all the shame be told,
This burden from my heart unrolled!

Tears fall. My soul in treacherous sand
Stumbles, by men with misery fed,
By gods—whom now my voice shall brand
Betrayers of my bed.

O Thou, that on the seven-stringed lyre,
Horn-framed, for lonely men to hear—
Mingling magic of voice and of wire—
Makest music heavenly clear,
God, in the glory of thy day,
Thy broken faith I dare display!

. . . Yellow stars in my robe aglow,
Flower to flower I was gathering. Lo,
A sudden flicker of flame,
A glory of gold hair came,
And force on my wrists there fell
Of hands irresistible
That dragged to the dark of the cave
The bridal slave
'O mother!' crying . . .
Lover, whom lust betrayed,
God with a mortal maid
Violently lying!

A child unto me was given,
A child of my sorrow.
By fear of my mother driven
I cast him forth on the bed,
The sorrowful bed where in sorrow
This body was wed. . . .
Oh me! . . . And now he is gone,
Of ravenous wings the prey,
My son—and thine, O Heart of Stone,
Whilst thou on the harp dost play,
Jubilant, singing, alone.

Oê! Hear!
Thou Leto's Son, I bid thee hear,
Dealing thine oracles from the gold seat
At the world's heart where all the world's ways meet,
I will proclaim it in thine ear!
Thou, ravisher, art traitor too
Unto this Xuthus so to give
(Nothing to him for an old love due)
A son within his walls to live,
But the babe of thee and me begotten
To leave forgotten
To rending talons for his mother's hands,
That wound him in soft bands.

Delos is hating thee,
And the Bay and that neighbour tree
That laughs in her delicate hair,
The Palm, where Leto bare
A holy birth on the sward,
Even the Fruit of the Lord.

That is the human criticism. It is perhaps none the less unanswerable because, in a manner very characteristic of Euripides, it dies away in the vision of some ancient anguish where by the magic of memory sorrow has become, in the words of Keats, more beautiful than beauty's self. The divine apology follows. And what is it? Nobody knows better than Euripides that no real answer is possible, but it is curious to see the kind of answer that he makes Olympus give. What happens after the outburst of Creusa is this: At the instigation of an old slave, who is devoted to her, she contrives a plot for poisoning Ion. It is detected just in time, and Ion is for putting her to death. At this point the old prophetess appears with the cradle and other tokens which she had found with Ion and kept. Creusa recognizes them, realizes that Ion is her son, and finally convinces him of this. In the rapture of recovering her child she is willing to forgive the god, but Ion sets off to demand an explanation in the very heart of his shrine. He is stopped by the goddess Athena. Apollo has sent his sister this time. This is what she says:

It is I, Pallas, named also of one name with your city, that have come in rushing haste from Apollo, who judged it wrong to come in your sight, lest blame for the past should reach the general ear; and sendeth us to speak his words to you: that Creusa here is thy mother, Ion, by Apollo and that he is giving thee to him (no begetter of thine) to whom he has given, that thou mayest be thought one of a most noble house. But when this policy was published openly, fearing thy death by thy mother's designing and hers by thee, he saved thee by his contrivances.

My lord kept silence about these things, purposing in Athens to make it known to this thy mother that thou art hers and to thee that she is thy mother and Apollo thy father. . . . Apollo was right in all he did. . . .

Euripides leaves it at that.

e

A little before the *Ion* there had appeared the strange play *Heracles*. It deals with the madness of the hero when he slew his own children. The curse was sent upon him by the goddess Hera, who hated and persecuted him all his life because he was the son of her husband but not of herself. One cannot estimate the impression this drama must have made without some realization of all that the name of Heracles suggested to the contemporaries of Euripides. It suggested, to begin with, a great figure, quite the greatest, in the mythology of Hellas. The old epic poetry, outside of Homer, was full of him. And yet he was not merely or mainly a literary hero, like Hector or Achilles. He was dear to the popular heart, like Robin Hood or William Tell, so that he was a trump card to play in the pantomime-like farces of the Old Comedy. Add to this that his cult as an actual Greek divinity was powerful and everywhere. And, of course, there was not a man or woman or child who was not familiar with the Twelve Labours. Whatever may be the ultimate explanation of these, Heracles very soon came to be regarded as the type and model of the *Euergetês*, or Benefactor, whose business in antiquity was not to give away money, but to build roads, to drain

marshes, to exterminate wild beasts and tyrants. His madness, which originally would seem to have some ritual significance, held a particular interest for thinking people by suggesting a problem in the psychology of the Strong Man. Of all possible dramatic heroes the most ' sympathetic ' was Heracles.

The almost universal opinion of antiquity held that madness was a divine visitation. It was only a few men of science who perceived that (as one of their writings [1] expresses it) " no malady is more supernatural than another." Whatever view may have been held in private by Euripides, he was bound as a Dramatist, or rather as a Greek Tragic Dramatist, to work with the material presented to him, first in the beliefs of his audience, and secondly in the tradition itself, which was clear that the madness of Heracles was caused by Hera. This, together with the ' sympathetic ' character of the hero, enabled the poet to raise in the most acute form a problem which has disturbed the modern even more than the ancient world. It is the problem agitated in the Book of Job. But there is no happy ending to the story in Euripides. We are left with the question still unanswered, Why did Hera do it ? Where was the justice of such an act ? What are we to think of a divinity who is capable of these things ?

The play opens in Thebes at a time when Heracles has been absent so long upon his last and most dangerous adventure, his descent into Hades to bring out the dog Cerberus, that people have begun to believe that he will never come back again. Lycus, the new ruler of Thebes, who has usurped the throne by murdering the father of

[1] The Hippocratean treatise *On the Sacred Disease*, *ad. init.*

Megara, the wife of Heracles, resolves to put her children to death. He is quite frank about his intention and his reason for it, which is that the children might grow up to avenge their grandfather. He is so machiavellian in his sentiments that one is led to suspect an element of satire against very similar views which, if we may trust Thucydides, were at this period (about the time of the massacre in Melos) frequently on the lips or in the hearts of Athenian politicians. In the moment of danger Heracles unexpectedly turns up, and, having learned the truth, enters his house, intending in due time to kill the tyrant.

The scene which follows is one of the most extraordinary in Ancient Tragedy, nor will it ever be quite certain how it was acted. We need not discuss these difficulties here ; let us merely observe what happens. A demon called *Lussa*, or Madness, who would surprise us much less in Aeschylus than in Euripides, presents herself along with Iris, the messenger of the gods and a furious partisan of Hera. It is rather characteristic of Euripides that he makes the demon a good deal less detestable than her companion. After some parley Lussa dashes into the house, where she drives Heracles insane, so that he murders his children. Finally Athena appears and strikes him into a swooning sleep. When he awakes, the fit of frenzy gone, and discovers the results of it, his agony of mind is such that he thinks of suicide. He speaks of this to his friend Theseus of Athens, who happens to have come to Thebes. What he says I shall render as closely as I can, that the reader may see what the words amount to when the poetry has gone out of them. It is so easy otherwise, in dealing

with poetry so difficult and so different, to let the enchantment of the form and sound drug our apprehension of the sense.

HERACLES. *Listen to me now, that I may contend with arguments against your admonitions, and I will make it plain to you that both now and formerly my life has been a hell.*

First, I am the son of a man who killed his mother's aged father, and with that blood on his head married Alcmena, who bare me. (Zeus was the actual, Amphitryon the nominal, father of Heracles.) *When the foundation of a family is ill laid, the children cannot be lucky. Zeus—whoever Zeus may be—begot me and made Hera my enemy.* (To Amphitryon) *Still, do not you, old man, be vexed at all, for I look upon you as my father rather than Zeus. When I was still unweaned, the Wife of Zeus sent in upon me fire-eyed serpents against my swaddling clouts to kill me. And when I got the flesh of early manhood about my bones, what need to reckon the labours I endured? . . . Now I have endured this final labour, Oh Heavens! which has been to put the coping-stone of sorrow on my house by murdering my children. . . . Why then should I live? What profit shall I get of a useless and sin-stained life? Let the glorious Consort of Zeus beat on the floor of Olympus with dancing foot! For she has got her wish, having utterly ruined and uprooted the first man in Greece. Who would pray to a goddess like that?—one who, on account of a woman, out of jealousy at some amour of Zeus, ruins the benefactors of Hellas, who could not help it at all!*

THESEUS. *There is no mortal who is safe from accidents, and no god, if poets tell us true. Have not the gods been*

joined to one another in incestuous union? Have they not scandalously put their fathers in bonds to get the sovereignty? But for all that they are living in Olympus and they have put up with their sins. Then what will you say if you, a mortal, are too proud to endure your misfortunes, while the gods are not? . . .

Now I do not say that Theseus is Ironical here, for that would be a little heartless of him under the circumstances. But I do say that Euripides is Ironical. It may be that his true opinion comes out later, in a speech which he gives to Heracles, rather inconsistently perhaps and out of character: *Ah, but this misses the heart of my grief! I do not believe that the gods covet forbidden beds, and I have ever rejected the thought that they bind the hands of gods nor shall I be persuaded of it, or that one lords it over another. For God, if he is truly God, is in need of nothing. These are wretched stories of bards.*[1] But this is a passage where to leave out the poetry is to leave out everything. So I add Gilbert Murray's version:

> *Say not there be adulterers in Heaven*
> *Nor prisoner gods and gaoler. Long ago*
> *My heart has known it false and will not alter.*
> *God, if he be God, lacketh nought. All these*
> *Are dead unhappy tales of minstrelsy.*

f

This Irony came to penetrate the thought of Euripides as completely as a simpler and older form of it occupied the mind of his contemporary Thucydides, or that new

[1] *Heracles*, l. 1340 f.

and brilliant variety which glitters in the pages of Plato expressed the deepest meaning of that other contemporary, Socrates. The Irony of great writers differs as much as the men themselves, and will often give more of their true quality than any other element of their style. This may be said of Euripides. It is not merely the bitterness of his Irony—and it can be bitter enough in all conscience—which gives it its individuality. Bitterness alone would not do it. But there is, mixed in with the bitterness, and giving it an indefinable but unmistakable flavour, a curious human sympathy—a sympathy catholic and exceptional, rejecting none but preferring the rejected of others. Whatever Euripides may be, he is not cynical. He is often fiercely satirical, but the victims of his satire are with negligible exceptions easily understood, never anything but entirely human, unless, of course, when he is attacking the gods, against whom the gravamen of his charge is just this, that they are not redeemed by humanness. Thus when Jason, who has let Medea follow him to Greece and then deserted her, explains to the Barbarian princess that at least he has brought her to the metropolis of culture, one feels the fierceness of the Irony, but one also sees that here is quite the sort of excuse that a man in Jason's position was likely to make.[1] He knew Medea was a genius, and with the clumsiness of an embarrassed man pays her this maddening compliment. Again, there is Pheres in the *Alcestis*. He is the father of Admetus, to whom the Fates were willing to grant a limited respite from death if he could persuade someone else to die for him. He tried to persuade Pheres. But the old man not unnaturally sees the

[1] *Medea*, l. 536 f.

matter in a different light: *Don't die for me and I won't for you.* This line, which by itself would be very funny, is immediately qualified by the famous and thrilling line which follows. *You are glad beholding the light*, it says in literal translation. *Think you that your father is not glad?* That is human enough at any rate. But the whole of the altercation between father and son [1]—the selfish, argute, vital old man and the romantic, egotistical, eloquent son—is a brilliant piece of Irony in a somewhat lighter vein than we generally find in Euripides; for, indeed, the *Alcestis* is not quite a Tragedy.

With all that it remains true to say that among all the great writers of antiquity Euripides is the saddest—'the most tragic of the poets.' How far his peculiar Irony was bred of this sadness, and the sadness from some defeat of high illusions, is matter for probable but not certain conjecture. But surely it is the Irony that gives to his sadness that quality so disturbing to minds that do not love to be disturbed. The greatest power in the world is at the last the imaginative sympathy from which spring poetry and art and all true understanding. Euripides possessed this sympathy in an extraordinary degree, and he brought it (embittered as it was and in some ways imperfect) to bear on the great abiding problems of human life. The result is that, since he wrote, the world has never been able to think and feel about these problems as it did before Euripides stated the case of the woman and the slave and him that hath no helper. There have been greater poets, but hardly even to the greatest has it been given to awaken as he did the spiritual perceptions of humanity.

[1] *Alcestis*, l. 629 f.

VIII

a

To defer until now the consideration of Homer has an appearance of eccentricity. Yet the logical development of an idea or an art does not always run with the movement of time, and the true eccentricity may sometimes lie in forcing it to do so. This applies very clearly to Homer. His Irony presupposes certain things better illustrated in other and later authors; I mean those popular notions, much older than he both in essence and origin, from which Irony was bred. It is because the Attic Drama continued to the last to operate with those notions, even in refining them, that it has seemed plain reason to hold that thread of inquiry to the end. Without this preparation the Homeric method could not be fully understood, could not perhaps be understood at all. With it we may hope to understand. Yet not easily; for here, as elsewhere, Homer presents us with a problem. The doctrine of the Divine Jealousy, preached to weariness by other poets, the very doctrine which first provoked the reaction of Irony, is not preached by him. It is not even clearly stated. He knows it, of course, but he makes no direct use of it. Homer has his own method. Let us study it in operation.

b

What is the plot of the *Iliad*? An aged priest of Apollo comes to the camp of the Greeks before Troy

and offers a ransom for his daughter, a captive in the tent of their King, Agamemnon. The Greeks with one exception are loudly in favour of restoring his child to the old man. But the exception is Agamemnon. He says that nothing will induce him to give the girl up, that he proposes to make her his concubine, and that it will be the worse for the priest if he be caught in the camp again. Thereupon the old man trembles and departs, praying to his god to avenge his tears. Apollo hears the prayer and sends a plague upon the Greeks. Their chiefs meet in council. The prophet Calchas declares the ground of Apollo's wrath, and advises the restoration without ransom of the girl to her father. Agamemnon then complains that Calchas never prophesies anything calculated to give him pleasure, but only troublesome matters. He wants to keep the girl, Chrysêis, as he prefers her, he says, to Clytemnestra, his legal wife. However, since everybody seems to expect it of him, he will let her go, provided that the rest make up the loss for him. When Achilles protests against this, Agamemnon replies that, if he does not get the equivalent he desires, he will go and take it, if necessary, by force. Achilles retorts that, if this is the sort of gratitude he is to receive (as he has received it on all occasions) from Agamemnon, he will sail back to his own kingdom of Phthia, in Thessaly. The King bids him run away whenever he likes, adding that he has now decided that it is Achilles' own captive girl, Brisêis, that he is going to take to fill the place of Chrysêis. Achilles then swears that he will fight for the Greeks no more.

Agamemnon later carries out his threat, sending to Achilles two heralds, who carry away Brisêis. From

that moment the young hero steadily refuses to help his fellow-countrymen, although things go ever worse with them, until at last they are driven back to their ships, with all their bravest wounded, and see nothing before them but sheer destruction. Agamemnon then humbles himself so far as to send an embassy to Achilles, admitting his fault and offering every kind of indemnification. Achilles remains inexorable. Nothing, he says, not all the wealth of the world, not even the imminence of ruin for the Greek cause, will induce him to be friends again with the man who has taken from him his Brisêis. So the slaughter goes on, Achilles gloating. At last the Trojans set fire to a ship. Fearing now for his own ships, he yields at last to the persuasion of his dear friend, Patroclus, and sends him into the battle to clear them of the enemy. Patroclus succeeds in this, but soon after falls in combat with Hector. When the news reaches Achilles, his grief and fury pass all bounds. He returns to the war, kills Hector, and drags the naked dead body behind his chariot wheels before he gives it back to its father, Priam.

Achilles is one of those who, according to the remarkable nonsense of Hamlet, love 'greatly to find quarrel in a straw.' He was clearly right in his original contention with Agamemnon, although it seems inadvisable, even when your commanding officer is in the wrong, to tell him that he has been drinking and has an impudent look in his eyes, which are those of a dog.[1] But for the satisfaction of the kind of pride that is wounded in a quarrel about a bedfellow whom he does not even profess to love—for such a reason to bathe in the blood of his

[1] *Il.*, 225.

fellow-countrymen and sacrifice his best friend seems the surest way for Achilles to forfeit any claim to sympathy. Mr. Mackail has called the subject of the *Iliad* 'second-rate,' and one sees what he means. It would have been no wonder if he had called it third-rate or fourth-rate. When you strip its poetry from the *Iliad* you are left with—well, something like my summary. Homer, Mr. Mackail goes on to say, triumphs over his subject. I take it that this view is generally accepted among those competent to judge. Perhaps my own is not in essence different, but I prefer a different way of stating it. I do not think that the story of the *Iliad* is, for Homer's purpose, a second-rate one. I think, on the contrary, that it is of the first-rate.

That opinion, I do not disguise from myself, will take some justification. The supreme test is clearly Achilles. If it can be justified in his case, we may, I should suppose, hold it for proved. It seems then to me that Achilles provides us with the supreme achievement of the Ironic method in Homer. This can be shown only at some length and in some detail. But the essence of the Irony lies in something almost too simple, as we say, for words. Achilles is represented as knowing himself foredoomed to an early death 'far from his native land.' In the light of this knowledge he moves throughout the *Iliad*, and in that light we are made to see him. It changes everything.

After that puerile quarrel with the King, when the heralds have just gone away with Brisêis, Achilles goes alone to the sea-shore, and, looking over the great deep, calls upon his mother, the sea-goddess. "*Mother, since it is but a little hour I have to live, honour at least the*

Olympian, high-thundering Zeus, should have confirmed to me; but so is it that not even a little hath he honoured me. For why the son of Atreus, far-ruling Agamemnon, hath shamed me; for with his own hand he hath taken away and keepeth in his hold my prize of valour." And the poet goes on: *So spake he weeping, and his mighty mother heard him where she sate in the deep waters by her old father's side. And quickly she rose up like a mist from the grey sea, and knelt before him as he wept, and soothed him with her hand, and spake and named him by his name. "My son, why weepest thou? What sorrow has come upon thy heart? Tell me all; keep back nothing in thy heart, that we both may know."* [1]

Whatever we may think of the son, we cannot withhold sympathy from that mother. Her beauty and her tenderness and her immortal sorrow enfold her flaming, early-dying son in a cloud (like one of those magical spear-proof mists so frequent in Homer), which our criticism shrinks from penetrating. Later, in a darker hour, when of Achilles it can at least be said that in the passion of his regret and grief for Patroclus he is suffering as only that vehement nature can suffer, she heard again his cry and lamented among her Sisters of the Sea: "*Hear me, my Sisters of the seed of Nereus, that hearing ye may all well know what sorrows are in my heart. Ah, woe is me, sad mother of the bravest, since blameless the son and strong that I bare to be mightiest among heroes, so like a young tree he shot up, and I nurtured him like a plant on a garden slope, then cast him forth upon the beaked ships for Ilium, to do battle with the Trojans. Never shall I get him back again, home returning to his father's house.*

[1] *Il.*, i. 352 f.

And while I have him alive and beholding the light of the sun, he is sad, and I cannot by going help him at all. But go I will, that I may see my dear child and hear what woe has come upon him, though from the battle abiding."

So saying, she left the cave, and they went weeping with her, and about them the wave of the sea was broken. And when they had come to the fertile Trojan land, they went in a line up the shore to where the ships of the Myrmidons were drawn up thick round swift Achilles. And by him heavily moaning stood his mighty mother, and uttered a sharp cry and clasped the head of her boy, and in lamentation said: "My child, why weepest thou? What woe has come upon thy mind? Tell all the matter, hide it not. Indeed, thy prayer hath been fulfilled for thee of Zeus even as formerly thou didst heave up thy hands and pray that the Sons of the Achaeans be pent up all together by the poops for lack of thee and have deeds of horror wrought upon them."

With a deep groan the swift runner Achilles spake to her: "Mother, these things the Olympian has indeed fulfilled for me. But what pleasure can I have therein, when my dear comrade is dead, Patroclus, whom I honoured more than all my comrades—like my own head? I was the death of him, and Hector spoiled and stripped him of that dread armour strange and beautiful, the bright gift of the gods to Peleus on that day when they cast thee in the bed of a mortal man. Oh for thee, better to have dwelt there with thy Sisters of the Sea and for Peleus to have wedded a human wife! But now awaiteth thee sorrow unmeasured for thy son slain, whom thou wilt not receive again returning home, since rage forbids me to live or to be among men, if Hector shall not be the first to lose his

life, smitten beneath my spear, and pay retribution for the despoiling of Patroclus, Menoetius' son!" [1]

In a good deal of modern criticism one finds it asserted or assumed that one point in which we have an advantage over the ancients is in the penetration and subtlety of our psychology. It may be so, probably it is so. But even in this it is hard not to be deceived by mere appearance. The terminology we have created for what we now call a science makes it comparatively easy to write about the moods and motions of the soul in a way that is subtle and penetrating. But, after all, the great thing is that our psychology should be true, and this kind of truth the critics of all ages have found in the Greeks. For my own part I cannot see how the passage just quoted from Homer fails in penetration and subtlety beside any modern model; but at least the truth of it strikes to the heart. How the whole character of Achilles comes out in it! Truly this poet had some 'knowledge of human nature'—of pride and passion, which still can spare a thought of half-wondering pity for the goddess who left her heaven under the waves to become his mother. As sympathy is the beginning of knowledge, so knowledge is often the beginning of sympathy. One begins to understand Achilles, to see what life meant for him living thus under sentence of death. It would only be an awkward impertinence to explain the art which makes us see him through the eyes of the mother, who, after all, knew him best.

What follows touches an extraordinary height of tragic sublimity, extraordinary because for all the splendour in which the language of Homer is always steeped

[1] *Il.*, xviii. 52 f.

the tragedy is so simple, so human and pitiful. Achilles has just spoken of Hector's death. *Thetis answered him weeping: "Quickly to die then is thy doom, my child, from what thou sayest. For straightway after Hector thy fate is prepared for thee." Then mightily moved spake to her swift-footed Achilles: "Straightway let me die, since it was not given me to help my comrade when they were killing him! Very far from his native land he perished for lack of me to drive off destruction. And now, since I go not back to my own fatherland, and was no light of safety to Patroclus nor my many other comrades whom godlike Hector slew, but sit beside the ships a useless burden of the ground—I like whom there is no other of the mailclad Achaeans in battle, though in speech there be others that excel me—perish strife from among gods and men, and anger that maketh even a wise man mad! . . . And now I go that I may find the destroyer of that dear head, even Hector; and my death I will take in that hour when Zeus and the other immortal gods resolve to bring it to accomplishment. For neither did the Strong Man, Heracles, escape his death, dearest though he was to the Lord Zeus, the Son of Cronus, but destiny subdued him and the hard anger of Hera. So also I, if a like destiny is ready for me, shall lie when I fall in death. But let me win bright glory now and make certain deep-robed women of the Trojans and Dardanians wipe the tear with both hands from their soft cheeks and be shaken with their sobs, and let them know that now at last back in the battle am I!"*

And so he has his revenge, slays Hector, brutishly dishonours the dead body—and finds at last that he has gained nothing thereby, not even the certainty that

Patroclus cares! Here, you would say, is anticipated the Euripidean Irony. Yet that first impression quickly appears mistaken. The Irony of Homer is not so simple always as it looks, but it is in general a fairly plain comment on the human tragedy. His text might be the title which Johnson chose for his poem, so much nobler intrinsically than its more brilliant Latin original: *The Vanity of Human Wishes*. It is also the text of perhaps the main body of the greatest Greek literature. Achilles had his wish: glory and a short life. It is not to be supposed that the spirit which created the *Iliad* did not approve the choice. But this approbation did not make it belittle the price which Achilles paid. The popular Greek view (whose exact sincerity it is, no doubt, a little hard to test) held that it was best for a man not to be born, but being born he should make as good a fight of it as he can, not refusing any pleasure he can honestly come by. That, raised to the heroic pitch, is probably the philosophy of the Homeric Poems. It is, as we have seen, not so much itself Ironical as a natural soil for Irony. The Irony emerges with the particular case. In the case of Achilles it is our foreknowledge of the event which causes us to view his struggles in the net of destiny with minds full, not, if we follow Homer, of any Euripidean rebellion, but simply of what we have learnt to call the Irony of Fate.

All that he has made us feel is concentrated and concluded in the interview between Achilles and Priam. I give the passage in spite of its familiarity, because the beauty and the pathos of it are apt to overwhelm criticism, and criticism is what is needed if we are to observe the working through it all of Homer's art in Irony. Yet

no sooner is attention drawn to it than the Irony is seen, worked out in its every implication. Old Priam comes, helpless and unarmed, to Achilles' tent to beg for the body of Hector, his dead son. He comes in, amid the amazed silence of all, falls at Achilles' feet, and speaks: "*Remember thy father, godlike Achilles, an old man even as I, treading the perilous way; yea, him it may be the dwellers round are harrying with none to ward off wreck and ruin. But he—surely he is glad at heart when he hears of thee as living, and every day his hope is to see his son returning from Troy. But I am all undone, since my sons that I begat were the bravest in the wide land of Troy, and of them I say that there is left not one. Fifty I had when the sons of the Achaeans came. Of all those many did Ares loosen the knees beneath them. But him that alone was left to me, him the defender of the city and its folk, didst thou slay two days ago as he fought for his fatherland, even Hector; for whose sake I come now to the ships of the Achaeans with measureless ransom to buy him back. Yea, fear God, Achilles, and think of thy father, and pity me. More to be pitied surely am I. I have endured what no mortal on earth hath yet endured—to stretch forth my hand to the beard of the man that is the slayer of my son.*"

So spake he, and stirred in the other the longing to lament his father's case; and taking the old man's hand he gently thrust him away. Each with his memories they wept, he, curled up before Achilles' feet, sobbing for Hector the Slayer, and he, now for his father, now for Patroclus; and in that house arose the sound of their lamenting. But when divine Achilles had enough of wailing, and the desire thereof had passed from his body and his mind, straightway

from his seat he sprang and raised up the old man by his hand, pitying the grey head and the beard of grey, and spake and said to him winged words : " Ah pitiful, surely the troubles that thy soul hath borne are many ! How daredst thou come to the Achaean ships alone, into the sight of the man that hath slain thy many sons and brave ? A heart of iron methinks is thine. But now sit thee down on the high chair, and for all our grieving we will let our sorrows sleep in our hearts, for in cold lamentation is no profit. Two jars are set upon the floor of Zeus, filled with such gifts as He giveth, one with ills, the other with blessings. And he for whom Zeus that swings the Thunderbolt mingles His gift now falleth in with ill, now at another time with good. And him to whom He giveth of the baleful things He putteth to despite, and a curse of hunger hunts him over the divine earth, and to and fro he goeth, honoured neither of gods nor men." All this, I may say in perhaps inexcusable parenthesis, is quite different from the doctrine of the Divine Jealousy. *" So indeed to Peleus from his birth the gods gave shining gifts ; for he exceeded all men everywhere in riches and in prosperity, and was King of the Myrmidons, and the gods made a goddess his spouse unto him that was a mortal. Aye, but on him also God brought evil, for that no seed of princely sons arose to him in his house, but one son only he begat, to die untimely. Yet not even him, lo ! do I tend in his old age, since very far from home am I sitting in Troyland, hurting thee and thy children. And thou also, old man, as we hear, wert happy once."* [1]

What is the use, in the presence of poetry like that, of talking about Irony or anything else ? Why, none

[1] *Il.*, xxiv. 486 f.

whatever. But our most futile endeavours are not always the least instructive, and so I remark that the Homeric Irony doubles its effect by representing Achilles as himself aware of what is to befall. Thereby we can observe the Irony in his mind as well as in our own. It is somewhat idle to ask if this is deliberate art and not rather the happy result of following a tradition in which this prescience of Achilles was something 'given.' Art of the kind that produced that interview with Priam is not dependent upon happy accidents. But accident may help. It so happens that the Greek epic reduces indirect speech to a minimum; every speaker is reported at first or second or even at third hand in his own words. This peculiarity, which seems to the modern love for the short circuit a highly tedious one (and is occasionally a little tedious even in Homer), does, however, make possible those refractions of significant lights which come when one mind reflects another. There is opportunity here for the subtlest kind of Irony: an opportunity which Homer knows perfectly well how to use when he pleases. But this, it must be confessed, is not often, the poet feeling, as I suppose, that such effects are too perplexing for narrative verse. He prefers to use the simple accident (if you call it accident) which gave him a traditional story to work upon. In this his art shows itself characteristically Greek; and, as one might perhaps expect of Homer, he reaches at one stroke the perfect manner of Greek Irony: *And thou also, old man, as we hear, wert happy once. . . .*

About this there will be naturally more to say. But our immediate consideration was Achilles. Yet is it necessary for me to argue my point at greater length?

It is already either proved or disproved. When one remembers—and Homer never lets us forget it—what this quarrel is costing Achilles, the fact that it is a paltry one seems a piece of Irony beyond tears or laughter. Of course, if you hate to find your hero behaving unheroically, such Irony is hard to bear ; and the modern world does not love Achilles. But Homer is not writing a romantic poem, to which our criticism (so largely romantic in its origin and terminology) is suitably applicable. Achilles is not to him a ' hero ' in the current sense at all, but a glorious young warrior who did one foolish thing and died because of it. He is overthrown, not in some gallant fight against odds, but (as we all are) by his own weakness. *We are betrayed by what is false within.* The *Iliad* is a true tragedy, as Aristotle saw, and full of the Tragic Irony. Achilles, Patroclus, Hector, Andromache and the rest, we behold them all in that transforming light, the light in which some pitying and wondering prophet might look upon his fellows. Is this a second-rate subject ?

But can Homer repeat these effects without repeating himself ? Let the reader put him to the first and most obvious test that occurs—say that other colloquy, equally famous, the parting of Hector and Andromache in the sixth book of the *Iliad*: *Nay, I also keep thinking of all these things, Andromache. But I cannot face the Trojans and their long-robed women, if like a coward I slink from the battle line, a thing which also my own heart forbids, since I have learned evermore to do valorously and fight among the foremost Trojans, winning great glory for my father and myself. Well do I know within my heart and soul a day will be when sacred Ilium shall fall,*

and Priam and the people of Priam of the Spear. But not for the after sorrows of the Trojans is my heart so troubled, nor for Hecuba herself nor King Priam nor my brethren many and brave that should fall in the dust before their enemies as for thee—when some mailed Achaean shall hale thee weeping away, taking from thee the day of thy freedom, and in Argos perchance thou shalt weave at another woman's loom, or carry the water of some foreign well with breaking heart (but strong necessity shall be laid upon thee). And one seeing thy tears will say: "Look, the wife of Hector, the bravest of the horse-taming Trojans when they fought round Ilium." So will some man say, and fresh sorrow will come upon thee for lack of such a husband to drive away the days of thy slavery. O may the earth be mounded deep and dark above me dead before I hear your cry and the rude hands upon thee! [1]

Here what casts its shadow over Hector's leave-taking is not prescience, but presentiment. For the purpose of Irony it is no less effective than knowledge itself. The Irony indeed may even profit by this added subtlety, since at least the reader is not left in ignorance that this is a last farewell.

Another device is to introduce the prescient gods. *He spake, and from the chariot sprang to earth in all his armour. And on the other side Patroclus, when he saw that, leaped from his car. And as when two beaked and taloned vultures with hook and crook on a tall crag fight with piercing yells, so yelling, these rushed on one another. And the Son of Crooked-Thinking Cronus saw them and had pity and spake to Hera, his sister and his spouse: "Woe is me that it is fated that Sarpedon, whom most*

[1] *Il.*, vi. 441 f.

I love, should be slain by Patroclus, Menoetius' son! Two counsels divide my yearning heart, whether to pluck him alive from doleful battles and set him in the fat land of Lycia, or now subdue him beneath the hands of Menoetius' son." Him then answered ox-eyed Hera the Queen: "Dread Son of Cronus, what word is this of thine? A man that is a mortal, destined of old to his doom, him wilt thou deliver from ill-sounding death?" [1]

Or the poet may allow himself one of his rare comments. Helen speaks: "*But two I cannot see . . . horse-breaking Castor and the good boxer, Polydeuces, very brothers of mine, of one mother born with me. Came they not from pleasant Lacedaemon, or came they hither with the rest in sea-going ships, but now will not mingle with the fighting men, dreading the scandals and the many revilings of me?" So spake she, but them the life-giving earth had now in her hold, in Lacedaemon there, in their native land.*[2] The poet feels it necessary to remind his auditors that Helen, from her ten years' absence from Sparta, could not know what they know—that her brothers were dead. And so he adds his comment to drive home the Irony. It seems extraordinary that it should still be necessary to point out that writing like this is something more than 'simple pathos.' You will look long into this simplicity before you find the bottom of it.

c

In his *Memories and Notes* [3] Sir Sidney Colvin tells us of the high estimation in which *The Bride of Lammermoor* was held by Mr. Gladstone. In conversation about

[1] *Il.*, xvi. 426 f. [2] *Ibid.*, ii. 236 f. [3] Pp. 126–7.

the nature of tragedy, ' Mr. Gladstone presently, in his most earnest and arresting manner, affirmed that in his judgment no theme was either more tragic in itself or more heightened in effect by its treatment than that of Scott's *Bride of Lammermoor*. He insisted on the circumstances of the deadly hereditary hate, fresher and better grounded than that of Montagues and Capulets, between the houses of Ravenswood and Ashton, and on the sense of such fixed implacable hate foredooming to disaster what might under other stars have been the reconciling loves of Edgar and Lucy. He dwelt on the heightening of all the actions and passions by the romantic gloom of the scenery amid which the tale unfolds itself, and by the grim staves of legendary prophecy represented as current in the minds of the common people and creating from the first an atmosphere of dire expectancy and awe. He reminded us how such prophetic saws and staves are not only ever on the lips of the hateful warlock, Elsie Gourlay, but how they darken with tragic foreknowledge even that almost incomparable, almost fully Shakespearean, comic and pathetic creation of the old steward, Caleb Balderstone ; and he dilated on the terrible intensity of the scene of the mad bride-murderess on her wedding night, and on the foretold but not less thrilling climax of the disappearance of the last heir of Ravenswood in the Kelpie's Flow.'

The story of the *Odyssey* is very different from that of the *Bride*, but this criticism of Mr. Gladstone's suggests the grounds of a comparison between the novel and the poem. Let me deal first with a point which may seem of comparatively minor importance—the accumulation and darkening of the omens towards the end. The

Bride, it would seem, is of all the Waverley Novels that upon which the opinion of readers is most sharply divided. The marks of haste and illness upon the book are clear enough, and it is, for Scott, curiously melodramatic. But a reader who does not feel the power of the story at all no doubt rules himself out as a critic.

Now when one considers the sources of this power they are seen to lie, not merely in the tragic interest of the tale itself, but in an art which (like so much of what is best in the genius of Scott) seems almost unconscious of itself and least happy when it is most conscious. In this matter of the omens, for instance, what moves us is not so much any particular omen as the way, noted by Mr. Gladstone, in which they darken about the end, like clouds above a sunset. And it is just the same in the *Odyssey*. Thus, in the nineteenth book, when Odysseus and Telemachus are removing the arms from the great Hall by night that the Suitors may be defenceless when the killing begins, Telemachus suddenly cries: "*Father, a very marvellous thing truly is this I am seeing with mine eyes! Why, the walls of the house, and the fair spaces between the pillars, and the rafters of fir, and the columns that hold all on high, are lit up to my sight as it were from a flaming fire! Some god is certainly here!*"[1] In the twentieth book Odysseus, lying awake before the dawn of the day that shall be fatal to his enemies or himself, prays to Zeus: "*Father Zeus, since it hath been your will over wet and dry to lead me, sorely buffetted, to my land, let some unsleeping wight utter me a well-boding word within the house, and without also let a sign*

[1] *Od.*, xix. 36 f.

from thee be shown!" So prayed he, and Zeus the Wise heard him and straightway thundered from his glittering Heaven. And from an outhouse near came the cry of a woman grinding meal there where Odysseus, the shepherd of the folk, had his mills planted, whereat women, twelve in all, were wont very busily to grind down wheat and barley meal, the marrow of men. Now all the other women were asleep, having ground all their grain, but one was not yet finished; she was the weakest. So she stayed her mill and spoke, and the King took it for a prophecy. "Father Zeus, that rulest over gods and men, loud was that thundering of thine from a starry sky, where is no cloud anywhere; this is a sign thou showest forth to somebody. Fulfil now even for poor me what I shall say: This day for the last and the latest time let the pleasant feast be eaten in Odysseus' halls by the Suitors, who have unstrung my knees with heart-wearing toil while I grind them meal. Let them feast now—and then no more!"[1] That is towards the beginning of the book. Towards the end Theoclymenus, the man with second sight, listening to the nervous laughter of the Suitors and perceiving them to be *fey*, rises in the banquet hall and clamours: "*Unhappy men, what cursed thing is this that has come over you? There is a shroud of night about your heads and faces and your knees beneath you; there is a sound of keening set up and tears are on your cheeks and drops of blood upon the walls and the fair spaces between pillar and pillar! Ghosts! crowding in the porch, crowding in the courtyard . . . lo, hastening to Hell and the darkness thereof! The sun has fallen out of the sky and the mist of death has come rushing over you!*"[2] Immediately follows the Contest

[1] *Od.*, xx. 98 f. [2] *Ibid.*, xx. 351 f.

with the Bow and the Killing of the Suitors. And so, exactly as in Scott, the effect is achieved by no sudden thunder out of a clear sky, but by such a gradual gathering of the clouds that the bolt, when it does fall, comes almost as a relief.

Consider again the instinct which moved Scott to choose for the principal scene of his tale a half-deserted castle suspended, as it were, between land and sea. No doubt the choice seems obvious enough, although you will not easily find a writer with a truer feeling for the genius of places. Yet if Scott chose Ravenscraig, it was surely not because it was the obvious, but because it was the only thing to do. The story demanded it. Again we see a resemblance between the *Bride* and the *Odyssey*. The main action of the poem takes place in the little island. Odysseus is landed there alone at dawn. By a notable touch of dramatic Irony the wanderer is asleep when he is gently laid by the Phaeacian crew upon the shore of his native land, and, when he awakens, fails in the mist at first to recognize it. From that point onward we watch every movement of the man among his unconscious enemies with a growing excitement, which is wrought up to its highest pitch when, by a device which is in some sense only a repetition of that which shut up the whole drama in the little isle, they are locked up together in the Hall, and the Beggar reveals himself the Avenger.

How are these resemblances to be explained? There is no question of imitation; and to say 'coincidence' is no explanation at all. Yet the problem seems easy to solve. Scott, like Homer, is telling an old story—'an owre true tale'—and, like Homer, he uses in telling it

the Ironic method. Because he was addressing an audience presumably ignorant of the story, he cannot use the method with the same freedom as Homer. Nor, unless you take the *Introduction* (as perhaps Scott meant us) to be an organic part of the book, does he venture so to fly in the face of all our modern prejudices as to do what Homer does in the very first words of the *Odyssey*, namely give us a *résumé* of the plot. But all is done that hint and prophecy and atmosphere can do; so that he must be a dull reader who does not perceive very early in the *Bride* what the end is to be.

There is only one art by which the old and familiar will never fail to thrill—the art of Irony.

d

Of the other form of Irony (somewhat crudely denoted the Comic as opposed to the Tragic) examples or traces have been found in Homer. But there is a difficulty involved. What sounds Ironic to us may have been quite plainly meant by Homer. The same doubt awakens for the reader of any poetry widely removed from him in time or circumstance. Who, for example, is to decide whether Chaucer was Ironical or not when he explains that the French of his Prioress was not the French of Paris, but that of Stratford-atte-Bowe?[1] The passage is constantly quoted as a delightful piece of Irony, and so it is. But whether it was so for Chaucer depends on the fine point whether in his time Parisian French was thought any better than Norman. The Irony would be none the worse for being unconscious.

[1] *Prol.*, ll. 125–6.

The poet always writes better than he knows, if not always better than he thinks.

The Homeric poetry seems to have this unconscious quality beyond most other verse we know. To read Homer is a voyage of discovery. *Apparet medio in fluctu nemorosa Zacynthus.* Everything he speaks of, even the most trivial, becomes significant, not dramatically, but from some indwelling loveliness revealing itself, as it were, unconsciously. The mere natural beauty of the Greek language will not explain this, since that beauty itself is only part of the thing which calls for explanation. There is something in the appeal of simple antiquity which no philosopher that I have read has properly considered. You show me a stone image, carved rudely but with some vigour and expressiveness, and say, ' This was made the other day by a rural stone-mason.' I should be moderately interested. But say ' It was made by some prehistoric man,' and I am fascinated and discover in it a wonderful force and beauty. And clearly I am right, though why I am right it seems very difficult to say. I leave that to some philosopher, and content myself with the observation. The question of originality (a very subtle matter) clearly comes in. But it may very well be that Homer, in subject, in language, in metre, was immensely indebted to predecessors ; indeed, that is one of the few conclusions regarding him which may be taken as certain. But poetically it matters nothing at all. For us he is the first voice to break the silence of European thought, and, as we listen to him, we share in that unique excitement.

> We were the first that ever burst
> Into that silent sea.

Anyone who should try to put this interest out of his mind as if it were something irrelevant would be forgetting that there is no absolute measure of poetry. Whatever is poetical is so because of its associations, which change with time. We cannot treat Homer as if he were a contemporary. He ought to be everything to us he can be.

Nevertheless it is part of the critic's duty to read as well as he may the mind of his author, which is not that of the reader, however intelligent, however sympathetic. Now if you ask an honest critic whether in such and such a passage which strikes us as Ironical Homer meant to be Ironical, you will often put that critic in a difficulty. Take the best instance of all. In the sixth book of the *Iliad* the great Achaean warrior Diomedes meets in battle the Lycian prince Glaucus and challenges him to single combat. Glaucus makes a long reply, the effect of which is to convince Diomedes that he and Glaucus ought to be friends, and as a pledge of this sudden friendship he suggests that they exchange armour. *Then*, says the poet, *Zeus took his wits from Glaucus, who exchanged with Diomedes gold armour for bronze, the price of a hundred oxen for the price of ten.*[1] Every schoolboy now sees the Irony of that. But did Homer see it?

It is the same with his humour. When he clearly means—dare I say 'to raise a laugh'?—his humour is of the most primitive sort. The Greeks laugh for pleasure when the weakling Thersites is beaten with a stick till a bloody weal springs up on his back.[1] The gods laugh consumedly to see Hephaestus walking, he

[1] *Il.*, vi. 234–6. [1] *Ibid.*, ii. 265 f.

being lame.[1] There is great laughter when Aias, son of Oïleus, falls among the fresh dung of cows and ' got his mouth and nostrils ' filled with it.[2] It is possible to find in Homer better humour than that. The question is whether the humour may not be generally in our own minds. I am sure, for example, that most of the ' Humour of Homer ' in Samuel Butler's essay is in Butler's mind, not Homer's. When Jebb quotes the passage in which Odysseus says that he did not tell his crew about Scylla in case they should stop rowing and hide themselves in the hold,[3] he is surely deceiving himself in thinking this to be consciously funny. It is the same with Homer's Comic Irony. Comedy there is in him and even satire, very delicately done—at any rate when he is dealing with certain of the gods. But not, I think—not intentionally—humorous Irony.

Accordingly it seems unnecessary to say more on that. The Tragic Irony in the Poems is quite different. It at least is intensely, continuously *meant*. It is the secret of much of Homer's beauty, and it is even more the secret of his power.

[1] *Il.*, i. 599 f. [2] *Ibid.*, xxiii. 777 f. [3] *Od.*, xii. 224 f.

IX

Theocritus complains that people would not buy his poems on the ground that Homer was 'enough for everybody.'[1] You sympathize with Theocritus. But the complaint is not likely to be deserved by the student of Irony, since for him (as we have seen) Homer is really not enough. We must resume our task of tracing the history of the thing; and this brings us back to Herodotus.

There has been of late years a curious change of opinion among scholars regarding Herodotus. There has come gradually to them the perception that he is not so simple as he looks. The old view, current when scholarship was less interested than now in the thought of writers, held him to be very credulous and (in his Pagan way) sincerely pious. A more recent phraseology described him as at once conventional and unsophisticated. Then an able book was written to prove that he was a great liar. But now an opinion almost the reverse of all this is being considered. His veracity and good faith as an historian have been on the whole triumphantly justified. His credulity is denied, his piety doubted. Indeed, a writer with any subtlety in his own mind cannot fail to detect an at least occasional subtlety in Herodotus. The question is rather if he be not pervaded by this quality.

[1] *Id.*, xvi. 20.

For who was this Herodotus? In the first place a man of brilliant intelligence, of sleepless curiosity, of as complete an absence of prejudice as was, and perhaps is, humanly possible. He was of Dorian descent, but he wrote in the Ionic dialect and possessed all the culture of fifth-century Ionia. That culture was a very wonderful thing, whose nature is not always clearly apprehended. It was developed (but not superseded) by the culture of Athens, and we are apt accordingly to look in Ionia merely for the dawn of a broader day. Now it is true that the thought of Athens is richer and profounder than that of Ionia, but in important respects it is not true to say that Athenian thought is more advanced than Ionian. It is rather the other way. There was in Athens a reaction (led in the main by Socrates) to a more conservative and religious view of life. Science was declared to have failed. But science had been the invention of Ionia, and Ionian speculation had been and remained to the end in the most remarkable way scientific, sceptical, rationalistic. For the gods of popular belief it had no use at all. Well, Herodotus is bred in this atmosphere. He becomes a great traveller, and travel is said to open the mind. He stays in Athens in the first great period of the New Learning, as expounded by teachers like Protagoras, who taught that knowledge was relative, and wrote concerning the gods that he could not be sure whether they existed or not owing to 'the obscurity of the subject and the shortness of life.' He is the friend of Sophocles and not improbably of Euripides also. He becomes an Athenian citizen in the colony of Thurii, a great resort of intellectuals, where he must have met Protagoras and the philosophic doctor, Empedocles.

After all this, is Herodotus to impose upon us with airs of a rustic *curé*?

I do not think he meant to. The explanation of the puzzle seems to be found in a true apprehension of his artistic purpose. For this Herodotus has received curiously little credit; partly perhaps because he has executed it with such deceptive, because complete, felicity. His subject is the Struggle between Greeks and Barbarians culminating in the Persian Wars. His book ends at a period as remote from him in time and character as we are from the age of Disraeli. If anything the difference between the age of Pericles and that of Themistocles was, at least intellectually, greater than the difference between us and the mid-Victorians. The generation of Pericles had really discovered a new intellectual world; whereas it may be that we have merely lost an old one. To Herodotus, at any rate, the world of Themistocles must have seemed pre-scientific. A mist rose between, through which the Marathonian fighters loomed, figures of a heroic simplicity, like Wallace or Washington. This result was inevitable, it was creditable, it was even largely true. At any rate, in the absence or deficiency of better evidence, it was all Herodotus had to use. There are traces in him of some tendency to criticize the tradition. But the artist in him accepts it. He labours hard to be accurate, but not so hard as modern standards require and modern facilities permit. This is his weakness. His strength lies in his power of seeing and making us see the past. With what vividness, with what an impression of reality, with what wealth of colour, there is no one who has once read him but remembers well.

Such a gift would by itself make him a great writer, but not necessarily a great historian. Let us consider, then, a little more nearly what he has done. He has not written his book from his own point of view, although naturally (for the man is human) that now and then appears. If he had so written, the result would have been widely different from what it is; we should have had the work of a contemporary of the great Sophists more 'daring' perhaps than that of Thucydides himself, the contemporary of Socrates. What we have instead is an attempt to understand the mind of another age. The men of Herodotus' pages speak the language and think the thoughts of their own time and not of the writer's. Consider the date of Herodotus, and then say if this is not a startling proof of historical genius. Scholars note and fasten upon the least indications of a later spirit in his story of the Persian Wars. Such indications are to be found. But how few they are, how little they break the harmony of the whole! They tell us what might have been, and by the same evidence how different is the thing we have.

The critic Dionysius regards the History of Herodotus as a kind of prose epic. There is truth in this view; how much is a matter for discussion. Yet, while it is no doubt hard to get scholars to agree on anything where the Greek epic is concerned, they would probably agree on this, that Homer and Herodotus are each in their several ways reproducing an earlier and, as it seemed to them, more heroic age than their own. This object of theirs naturally affects their style; that is, gives it a touch of archaism. I am aware that there are scholars who cannot find this touch in either. I am

sorry I cannot argue the point; it involves a delicate thing, the feeling for style, and cannot be demonstrated for the plain reason that we have no evidence for what may have seemed archaic to Homer or even to Herodotus. But that Homer, who was not by any means the first of his kind, did not realize the value and almost the necessity of some archaism for the 'grand style' of the epic is what I cannot bring myself to believe. And I am no more willing to believe a like paradox in the 'prose epic' of Herodotus. It was natural for them as artists to impart to their language a colour in harmony with the world they were depicting. It was, at least to ancient notions, even necessary. To vary style with subject—to write of heroes heroically and of slaves 'slavishly'—that is a principal maxim of ancient art. Those who see only the modernness in Herodotus, and translate him accordingly, surely lose a great deal. It is just the play of the modern mind, guessed rather than seen, behind the studied simplicity and archaism of the style which gives it its strange attraction. Translate Herodotus into up-to-date English and you destroy that attraction at a blow.

The story which he resolved to tell was as truly an epic subject as the Tale of Troy. It might have been put in Homeric verse if Herodotus, like his relation Panyassis, had been an epic poet. He preferred the new medium of prose. But historical prose already had its tradition, and this strongly influenced by the Epos. Men had already begun to write down the *Logoi* or oral traditions of their cities with little of the art, of course, and less of the poetry which we find in Homer, but in no very different manner and spirit. There was this

difference of spirit, that they tried to be more critical; and there was such difference of manner as you would expect between high poetry and somewhat childish prose. But the prose was little else than an effort to say what had hitherto been sung. The *Logoi*, in fact, themselves often of dateless antiquity, had been the raw material of the Epos as much as of the new prose-writers, and the manner of telling them was, even for Homer and Herodotus, largely dictated by tradition. There was a right way of telling them and a wrong way, and (even if their public had let them) Homer and Herodotus were too good artists to try a new way, however brilliant. They simply used the consecrated manner of the bard, of the story-teller, to achieve such effects as they desired. No other manner would have served them so well.

We are now perhaps able to appreciate at its true value the simplicity of Herodotus. It is not naïve, but neither is it false; it is artistic. I have already quoted an example of it as being the plainest statement I knew of the belief in the jealousy of gods. Here is another, to the same effect: *In our little lives there is no man so happy here or elsewhere but he will often have the thought that he would rather be dead than alive. For misfortunes fall, and diseases confound us, and make life that is short seem long. And so death is the dearest refuge for man from the malady of living, and the Jealousy of God is manifest in this, that He has let us taste the sweetness of life.*[1] This is said by the Persian Artabanus. Did Herodotus himself believe it? That is hard to credit, but the question at this point is merely stupid. It is not Herodotus who is speaking, but the Persian Artabanus. The

[1] Herod., vii. 45 f.

words are appropriate to *him*, and they are (you will admit) magnificent literature. They are perfectly simple, but a great and subtle artist arranged them.

It has always been allowed that Herodotus can tell a story. But it has not always been clearly understood that this difficult art has behind it, as the necessary condition of its perfection and almost its existence, a long tradition of practice. When Herodotus tells over again some favourite anecdote of the Ionian *raconteurs*, he tells it just like them, only better. He changes as little as possible, and very little was necessary, because infinite retelling in so beautiful a language could not but end in something like a masterpiece. Some of the marvellous stories in the Old Testament—the nearest things we have, I suppose, to the stories in Herodotus—undoubtedly owe their form to the long experience of popular masters of the art. Of course, the business of Herodotus is not mere story-telling, or he would not be the ' Father of History.' But the consideration of that larger function of his can wait, and indeed must wait, until we have considered this vital point of style. Let me try to illustrate the matter by quotation.

As good a story as another is the famous one about the Ring of Polycrates. Herodotus has been telling about Polycrates, who ruled Samos in the sixth century before Christ, and he proceeds like this: *In short time the prosperity of Polycrates increased and was noised abroad throughout Ionia and the rest of Greece, for wherever he was purposed to march, fortune made all things yield to him. And he got him a hundred fifty-oared ships and a thousand bowmen. And he robbed and plundered all men without respect of persons, "for," said he, "I shall*

give more pleasure to a friend by restoring what I took than by not taking from him at all. . . ." *But Amasis*—King of Egypt—*became somehow aware that Polycrates was in this greatness of fortune, and the thing troubled him. And when his fortune became far greater yet, he wrote upon a roll of papyrus this letter for Samos*: ' Amasis unto Polycrates saith thus. A pleasant thing it is to have hearing of a man that is a friend and guest that he is in prosperity: but thy huge good fortunes like me not, who know that the Holy One is jealous. Moreover, I have a certain wish that both I myself and whosoever are dear to me should have good hap in one matter and stumble in another, and evermore live in this alternation of fortunes rather than be lucky in everything. For never yet have I heard it told of any man that he prospered in all things and did not at the last come to a bad end utterly. Hearken now therefore to me and, having regard unto Fortune's favours to thee, do this. When thou hast bethought thee where thou shalt find that which is most precious to thee, whose loss will most afflict thy soul, cast it away in such manner that it will never return among men. And if thereafter good and evil chances come not in succession upon thee, get thee a remedy in the way counselled by me.' *When Polycrates read this, he conceived that it was a good counsel of Amasis, and he sought that one of his treasures at whose loss above all else he would be sick at heart, and seeking he found this. He had a seal that he wore, of the stone emerald, set in gold; Theodorus the Samian, the son of Telecles, wrought it. When therefore he had resolved to cast this away, he did as I shall tell. He embarked in a ship of fifty oars and so bade the crew launch out into the*

deep, and when he was a great way from the island he takes the ring from his finger and in sight of all that were with him in the ship casts it into the sea. And when he had done this he sailed back again and went into his house and was very sorrowful.

But on the fifth or the sixth day after there befell him this: A fisherman caught a fair great fish and deemed it a gift meet for Polycrates. So bearing it to the King's door, he said that he desired to come into the presence of Polycrates, and when the King granted him his desire he said, offering the fish: "O King, when I caught this fellow I thought it wrong to carry him to the market, though I am one that lives by labour of his hands, but he seemed to me to be worthy of thee and of thy royalty. Lo, here I bring him as a present to thee." The King was pleased with these words, and answers: "Thou hast done very well, and I owe thee double thanks—for thy words and for thy gift. We bid thee to dinner." So the fisher, accounting it a great honour, went into the house, while the servants cut open the fish, and there in the belly of him find the ring. As soon as they saw it they took it and brought it with joy to Polycrates and gave it to him, telling him in what manner it was found. And when it was borne in on him that the thing was of God, he writes in a roll all that he had done and what had befallen him in the issue, and when he had written he dispatched the letter to Egypt. But when Amasis read the letter which had come from Polycrates he understood that it was not humanly possible to fetch a man clear of that which was fated to befall him, and that Polycrates would have no good end, since he prospered in all he did, even finding what he cast away. And he sent a herald to him in Samos with a message of

severance between them. For this reason he did it, that when some terrible great calamity came upon Polycrates he might not be vexed in spirit as for a foreign friend.[1]

Afterwards, when Amasis himself was dead, Polycrates was treacherously enticed from his island and crucified. *So*, Herodotus makes comment, *of Polycrates the many prosperities ended in this.*[2]

Here, anyone may see, is not the first nor the fiftieth telling of the story. The manner of its telling proves that. The matter (which is folk-lore) goes with the manner, just as the traditional matter of Homer goes with his manner, although there are still some students of Homer who have not grasped this. I cannot undertake to believe that Herodotus thought his story true. He did not himself regard that as necessary. *I am bound*, says he, *to repeat what is currently said ; I am not bound to believe it.*[3] In other words, he was a writer of *Logoi*, the last of the Logographers, the first of the Historians. The two functions might seem incompatible, and to some extent they are, but not so much as one would expect. For to give us all the evidence without guaranteeing the truth of every part of it is not an unscientific procedure, but the contrary ; and this is what Herodotus does for us. If he were a man without discrimination, the result would be chaos. But Herodotus was not that ; he was very far from that.

This, however, is not a discussion of his place among historians, but of his use of Irony. If the reader has followed me so far, he will have noted for himself the Tragic Irony in the story of Polycrates. The method is strictly parallel with that of the Tragic Dramatists,

[1] Herod., iii. 39 f. [2] *Ibid.*, iii. 125. [3] *Ibid.*, vii. 152–3.

and the reason for this is plain. Both he and they base their art on the doctrine—'at once primitive and profound,' as Mr. Arnold Toynbee says—of God's jealousy of the eminent man. It was no doctrine for a child of the Enlightenment like Herodotus, except in so far as the artist in him believed it. For artists believe more than philosophers. But, whatever the rational part of him may have thought, the dramatic part exulted. The doctrine indeed is itself a dramatization of life, and presents the artist with his material more than half-prepared. Herodotus was not going to break the old mould and cast the story in a new one. If he had, his audience would have been puzzled and would not have liked it; and naturally he wished to please his audience. They did not want a new version with a new philosophy to it; they wanted the old story over again. So they got it.

But it is not merely for the purposes of his occasional stories that Herodotus accepts the view of life which I have called Ironic because it naturally leads to the sense of Irony in human affairs. It informs the whole organism of his History. For what is its subject? It might be called the Tragedy of King Xerxes. Everything leads up to that, and the whole machinery of dramatic Irony is brought into action, till *Hubris* at last is followed by *Nemesis*. But the movement is so large and slow that its drift is often imperceptible; there are times when it even seems to flow back upon itself. Yet the broad design of Herodotus is clear enough. The fall of Xerxes was something more than the fall of the world's loftiest head; it was the defeat of *Barbarism*. To understand the meaning of that defeat it was necessary to

have in one's mind a picture of the Barbarian world. This, therefore, Herodotus gives, and with such richness and variety of colour that it stands out to this day the most glowing canvas in historical and perhaps in any literature. So romantic, so surprising are many of the details, that he enjoys over the historical novelist the advantage expressed in the saying that truth is stranger than fiction. But although Herodotus on his own confession delights in digressions, and although one's first impression of the second book (for example) with its famous account of Egypt is that it is simply one long digression, yet he is not irrelevant. All the time there is slowly growing more distinct to our view the shadowy form of the enormous ancient thing that Hellenism was born to fight. For the real issue was not the personal fortunes of Xerxes, but whether the new way of life discovered in a few Greek cities was to live or die. Herodotus, who had personal experience of Persian government, admires it greatly, but you can have no doubt on which side was his heart. Liberty or despotism (enlightened, if you please), reason or custom, European or Eastern ways—that was the choice, and Herodotus had chosen. And no wonder if he did believe that the hand of God was in it when the Greek men actually prevailed against the dim multitudinous world of hostile Barbarism. That, one cannot doubt, was the most important event in the history of Western civilization, for it established its foundations. The popular mind dramatized it as the Fall of Xerxes. And Herodotus, seeing the artistic value of that, seeing also that it was a perfectly good symbol of the facts, dramatized it in this way too.

So his book is, in the old sense, Ironical in conception, just as the *Agamemnon* or the *Oedipus* is Ironical. As a consequence, necessary at least to a Greek artist, the style also is charged with Irony. It is a very simple style, simple enough to win for its author from uncritical readers the epithet of 'childlike.' Alas! the childlike air is as deceptive as it is engaging. Not that Herodotus meant to mislead. He was only following tradition and telling his story in the way familiar and suited to the popular mind, a mind childlike perhaps in its simplicity, but not at all childlike in its experience. The simplicity of Herodotus is not that of first words, but that of last, wherein the strong feeling of generations about God and man and his life on earth is reduced to terms whose very bareness makes their significance. One may smile, as I fancy Herodotus secretly smiled, at the Fish and the Ring. But the moral behind the story is no laughing matter, for it is what men had seriously come to think the only explanation of what we call the problem of evil. *God has given us a taste of happiness*, to make us feel the difference between mankind and Him. A terrible thing to believe, and one that reminds us of that striking saying of Goethe's, that what he had learnt from Homer was this, that our life on earth is already and actually Hell.

And yet 'cheerfulness will break in.' It is one of the pleasantest things in reading Herodotus to see that happen to him. Artistically perhaps he should not have allowed it to happen, since his theme was tragic, and Greek art always forbade what Milton calls the intermixture of tragic and comic stuff. Herodotus is careful not to smile too broadly, and his tragic note (as we have

seen) can be very grand and impressive. But his cheerfulness is indomitable, and so infectious that he can, and does, relate the most atrocious things without our noticing at the time their atrocity at all. They slip out of him and into us in the easiest way imaginable. The incapacity of the English language for saying shocking things without shocking prevents me from illustrating this trait. But the quality of the writer's mind can be indicated in other and more important ways. Thus when Herodotus went to the Egyptian Thebes the priests there produced evidence to show that the generation of men from gods was vastly earlier than the Greeks supposed; and this is how he introduces his anecdote: *When Hecataeus the historian described his family tree at Thebes and linked his descent to a god eleven generations back, the priests of Zeus did to him just what they did to me, although I did not describe my family tree.*[1] Think what the poets have made of Helen, and then consider this. *Such was the tale of the Egyptian priests*—that it was only the wraith of Helen that went to Troy, the woman herself remaining in Egypt all the time—*and I myself am disposed to add my assent to their story about Helen when I consider these things: If she had been in Troy, Helen would have been given back to the Greeks, whether Paris liked it or not. For Priam and his relations were really not so mad as to consent to risk their lives and the lives of their children that Paris might go on living with Helen. Suppose at first they did agree to this, yet after not only many of the other Trojans fell in battle every time they fought with the Greeks, but the sons of Priam himself (if we are to believe the epic poets) kept falling,*

[1] Herod., ii. 143.

sometimes by twos or three or more—when this sort of thing was going on, I expect that Priam would have given her back to the Achaeans, even if he were living with her himself.[1]

This is not the Tragic Irony, but the Comic, and nearer what we normally understand by Irony than anything we have yet met. That at any rate is our immediate impression—and yet. . . . Hear him again upon Helen. He has been telling how the Greeks carried off Medea from Asia. Then, he goes on, the Persians say that *in the next generation Alexander*, or Paris, *the son of Priam, having come to hear of these matters, determined to get a wife out of Greece by carrying her off, being well assured in his own mind that there would be no requital to be made ; for the Greeks had made none either. Therefore he carried off Helen. Then the Greeks resolved first of all to send messengers to demand Helen back and to ask satisfaction for the rapt. But when they brought forward these claims, the Persians on their part brought forward the rapt of Medea, saying that the Greeks had neither given compensation nor yet surrendered her when they were asked, and yet now looked for compensation from* them. *Up to this time, then, (they say) nothing more had happened than carryings off of women on both sides ; but hereafter the Greeks were gravely to blame. For their expedition into Asia*—the Trojan War—*was made before the Persian invasion of Greece. As for the carrying off of women, they are of opinion that it is wrong ; but to insist upon vengeance after they are carried away is silly—a sensible man will pay no attention to them. Obviously, if they had not wanted to be abducted, they would*

[1] Herod., ii. 120.

not have been. When the women were being captured from Asia the Persians disregarded the matter. But the Greeks gathered together a mighty host and afterwards came to Asia and put down the glory of Priam, for the sake of a Lacedaemonian woman.[1]

Is that Irony, or is it only Ionian rationalism? A somewhat depressing question, but one which perhaps requires consideration. I can see no easier way of answering it than to get into the mind of Herodotus. And, of course, we cannot. But some conjectures as to what was there are likelier to be right than others. Now whatever we may think about the merits of the passages I have been quoting, it is clear that the writer had a natural bent towards a kind of humorous scepticism. That was not surprising in a man of his race, his education, and his experience. But he must constantly have found himself under the necessity of keeping it in check when he was writing his History. For not merely was he concerned with the artistic problem of keeping a uniform colour throughout the book, but he had his audience to consider. The colour might (as sometimes happens even in Attic Tragedy) suffer an occasional lightening of tone without undue interference with the solemn character of the whole. Herodotus clearly takes full advantage of this privilege, and would doubtless have been glad to take more. It is possible that his audience—the greater part of it—would have welcomed such an experiment, for it had always been expected of the Logographer that he should mingle his instruction with entertainment. Nobody ever lived who was fitter to do that than Herodotus. But he had an artistic

[1] Herod., i. 3.

conscience, and he had set out to compose a book almost on the scale of Epic and almost in the spirit of Tragedy. So he had to keep a check upon his disposition to humorous comment. One can see, I think, that it was not quite easy for him ; but it was easier than to keep in check his disposition to satire. The man who could say these things about Helen, who knew what intelligent people were saying in Ionia and Italy about their fathers' gods, was not the man to believe the *naïvétes* of Artabanus the Persian. But what then ? The people to whom his book would be read believed them, and would resent their disrespectful treatment. Herodotus, as I imagine, found himself much in the position of Gibbon, who was afraid to say all that he thought. But when a man is placed like that, he is almost forced into Irony.

Herodotus, however, was not otherwise like Gibbon, still less like Voltaire. These modern parallels are in any case generally misleading, and the parallel with Voltaire is singularly so. The reader may please himself with a comparison of styles, and find in the charming limpidity of the Greek something of the Frenchman's clearness and wit. He may even find a passage that would not surprise in Voltaire. The island of Aegina held in great reverence and worshipped as its chief protectors the holy beings called the Sons of Aeacus. The Thebans, who had involved themselves in a war with the Athenians, asked the men of Aegina to help them. *The Aeginetans said that they would send them the Sons of Aeacus*—that is, certain cult-objects representing these divinities—*to be their helpers. The Thebans, trusting that the Sons of Aeacus would fight for them, renewed the war, but were roughly handled by the Athenians.*

So they sent once more to the Aeginetans, and gave them back the Sons of Aeacus, and asked for some men instead.[1] Cambyses, King of the Persians, fell in love with one of his sisters and wished to marry her. *But conceiving that this would be an unusual thing to do, he summoned the King's Judges and asked them whether there was any law which allowed anyone who liked to marry his sister. The King's Judges are Selected Men among the Persians, and hold their office till death, or till they are found out doing something wrong. These Judges administer the law and interpret the traditional code for the Persians, and everything is referred to them. Well, when Cambyses put his question, they returned an answer which was at once constitutional and safe. They said that they could not discover a law which permitted a man to marry his sister, but that they had discovered one which enacted that the King of the Persians may do anything he pleases.*[2]

But the spirit is different. Voltaire was out to destroy, Herodotus rather to preserve. That old world he set out to rebuild in the imaginations of men was not *l'infâme* to him. Many of its beliefs must have appeared to him outworn or even ridiculous; many of the things reported of it, and which he repeats, he must have known to be improbable or even false. But he loved it. It was hard not to smile at the *euêthia*, the 'innocence,' which now and again displayed itself so artlessly in the speech or actions of generations before or outside the Enlightenment. But the smile, when it does come, is kindly. Above all, it is not in the least superior. The truth is that, for all his criticism, often pointed enough, he idealizes the past. Such an idealiza-

[1] Herod., v. 80 f. [2] *Ibid.*, iii. 31.

tion was no doubt the very essence of his artistic conception of the History. But it would be an error to think that his imagination went one way and his heart another. If he paints the men of Marathon and Thermopylae as heroes, it was because he believed them to be heroes. If he works, as his friend Sophocles worked, with the old-world idea of a jealous Heaven, it is because he felt that a great drama had in truth been enacted on Grecian earth, and that in some sense or other God had been in it. If a really instructive parallel to the History be wanted, it may be found in the *Persians* of Aeschylus. For there also the Barbarian world rises before you, and the Triumph of Hellas is the Tragedy of Xerxes.

So it is the Tragic Irony in Herodotus that gives its tone to his work. It is not a sombre book; but still less is it a funny one. To be tragic in the Greek sense it is not in the least necessary to be sombre. The fall of greatness is awful, but it is sometimes witnessed with an awful joy. I find that emotion—that sense of an awful joy—in all that part of the History which describes the ruin of the hopes of Xerxes. It is exactly the emotion inspired by the *Persians*. Let us not fail to observe it in Herodotus because it is less familiar and perhaps less agreeable to us than the charming anecdotage which appeals so irresistibly.

But if the view of Herodotus here taken is at all a just one, we shall be seeing in him always the play of a spirit at once grave and gay, idealizing and critical, half-doubting and half-believing. A profound simplicity is in him—an Ironical simplicity.

X

a

Our ancestors were justly attached to an anecdote—it is in Marcellinus—telling how once Herodotus gave a private recitation from his book in a company which included the Athenian Olorus and his son Thucydides, and how, when the reading was over, the lad burst into tears. There are reasons for disbelieving the story, but there is a true meaning in it for all that. Thucydides came to hold but a poor opinion of the historical methods which satisfied his predecessor. But if the beauty of the old man's work never once moved him to tears or near it, that was not like the boy who lived to write the terrible History of the Peloponnesian War. It is only the idols one has loved that are so hard to break. And if the result was a new kind of history altogether, superseding the old, that does not mean that it owed nothing to Herodotus. The new kind was born in a reaction whose emotion is still traceable. On the shoulders of Thucydides, however reluctant, fell the mantle of Herodotus.

b

The Athens in which Thucydides grew up came nearer, so far as we can judge, to the realization of what she hoped to be, and what those who have felt her deeper influence have dreamed, than the Athens of any earlier or later day. She was rising in the flush of a new era—

rising spiritually in the creative ardour of her sons and materially in that loveliness of marble upon the Acropolis. It was under the direction of a statesman who did really believe that a city which put beauty and wisdom first would be a practical success, who even proved that this was so, and who, though he died full of disappointments, never lost his sympathy with youth. Not that Pericles imagined that all his Athenians were artists and thinkers —no partisan of realism in politics was more willing to look facts in the face—but he found that he could sweep his fellow-countrymen together by the passion of his own ideal. He put it to the multitude in a way it could understand. 'Be in love with Athens,' he said simply. And when he went on to tell them why, and uttered those famous phrases which Thucydides embodied in the Funeral Speech, they were willing to believe all he said because he so manifestly loved Athens himself. The response was as astonishing as the appeal itself. We study this response in literature and history, and we can vaguely estimate its results. But what must the thing itself have been? *Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, But to be young was very heaven.* And Thucydides was young, and a genius.

When he came under the personal influence of Pericles there is no telling now. But that he did is clear to any reader of the History, and that he did so early is a fair inference from the circumstance that he too belonged to one of the 'governing families.' This was always thereafter the chief influence upon him, but it was not the only one. The bent of his mind was (for an ancient historian) markedly scientific and philosophical; and if the design of his book excluded any discussion of the

problems of science and philosophy, it does not follow that he felt no interest in them. We may probably assume the contrary. It is not likely that the speculations which all intelligent people in Athens were discussing were not considered by so unprejudiced a mind. There was Anaxagoras explaining that the moon was not a goddess, but simply an enormous stone. What, in fact, could the gods of popular religion have had to do with the creation of an intelligible universe? Better leave them out of one's scheme of things altogether and see what one can do with purely mechanical forces directed by some Intelligence we may call *Nous*. There was Zeno with his paradoxes (such as that about Achilles and the Tortoise), all equally teasing and equally unanswerable. There was Protagoras, and later Socrates, maintaining that science had failed. There were a score of others. Thucydides could not help hearing. No doubt he heard even thus early that doctrine of the Superman on which the History has a word to say! There was another doctrine, to which Socrates was to give his own interpretation, that goodness was simply knowledge. After all, thought Thucydides, why not? Stupid people are usually bad, are they not? or at any rate useless, which comes to much the same thing. The arrogant young man!

Did speculations of that kind affect his conduct? Many readers of the History get the impression that the author judges people by a purely intellectual standard. It is more exact to say that it is only public men that he judges by an intellectual standard. His view seems to be that their private characters are no concern of the historian, although even this, not quite unreasonable,

view he is not rigid in maintaining. But it is fair to say that he does set a higher value upon brains than the Anglo-Saxon mind regards as quite moral. Did he judge himself in this way? It seems very likely that he did. He was justified in feeling that he would come out of the test triumphant. He had no desire for success in the vulgar meaning of the word, for he was one of the proudest of men; but he was ambitious to be the servant of a great idea, Pericles' idea and his own.

To fit himself for this service he must study above all else the three arts of war, politics, and rhetoric. The intensity of his study in these is evident in his book. The effects of the rhetoric are not always happy. It was a new discovery, the most important ever made in the history of prose literature. The principle of it was 'balance.' The speaker was no longer to run on, adding one simple sentence to another; he was to speak in periods so organized that each clause within it balanced another in meaning, in rhythm and even in sound. That was the perfect sentence. The danger of such a theory is plain enough, and was even greater in antiquity than it would be now because of the extreme delight which the ancients felt in such correspondences. The danger was of unreal antitheses, of empty jingles of sound. It can be illustrated in both its forms in Thucydides. And yet one feels that the new art was a necessity to him. He could never have expressed his thought in the running narrative style of Herodotus. He needed the complex sentence. A literary idiosyncrasy so intense as his instinctively finds the medium of expression best suited to it. And I think we must say that the style of Thucydides, devoid of charm, teasingly involved as it

sometimes is, has a power on the mind of the reader he can neither analyse nor resist.

The outbreak of the War gave him his opportunity. He had been keeping himself ready for that. He knew —everyone connected with Pericles knew—that a war was coming in which Athens would be attacked by a coalition of her enemies. He felt sure, perhaps again under the inspiration of Pericles, that it would be a far greater war than any that had gone before, and that Athens would issue from it victorious. One judges from the History that his whole nature was absorbed in the thought of this. An intense and perhaps somewhat narrow man ; not like Herodotus, whose curiosity is as multifarious as that of Pepys. The exaltation of such natures when it seems to them that their hour has struck has something about it which troubles more than the superstitious. Such happiness, one feels, is not the kind that lasts.

One understands how he burned for active service. Meanwhile there was a thing he could do ; he could write the history of the War. He knew the thought of Pericles. To relate how it came to be fulfilled in concrete reality, how the dream came true—would not that be a wonderful task ? He felt himself called to it.

The dream did not come true, and the History had to tell why. It is, to the reader who is not deceived by its studied absence of emotion, one of the unhappiest books in the world.

The studied absence of emotion—is not that but another name for Irony ? This must be the next subject of our consideration : the Irony of Thucydides. I have not made my meaning clear if I have failed to convey the

impression of a very proud man. I may at least try to convey that impression now. It may be done from his own language. He had determined that there was to be no sentiment in his History, no idealizing of the past, nothing but the truth without exaggeration. Nothing for the idealist, nothing for the 'realist' either; but just simply the truth. If you do not like that, Thucydides cannot help you. 'You find it uninteresting?' he says in effect at the beginning of his book. 'Then you might try one of the more romantic historians'—Herodotus, for example! 'I am not writing to give pleasure,' he adds. He hates 'charm' and steadily drives it out of his style, as if he wished to repel the casual reader. 'I am not asking for sympathy,' is his attitude; 'I simply ask you to use your brains. I do not pretend to think that you will find it easy; it is never easy to understand one of those rare books that are destined for immortality.' This was the man who failed when he was given his chance to use his sword for Athens. He had to tell that too. He gives the story of his failure just the space its importance in the War demanded, neither more nor less. He offers no explanation. The explanation was important only to himself; not to the History, not to you. What is one to think of a pride like that? Only later, when it becomes necessary for him to tell how he came to the knowledge of certain facts—*that* was the important matter!—he says, *It happened that I was exiled from my country for twenty years after the fall of Amphipolis.*[1] That is what all his hopes had come to, and this is what he says.

Some have thought him cold and strange.

[1] v. 26, 5.

c

So the History, the record of that great hope for Athens that ended in the triumph of commonness, exhibited by the mere force of facts the evolution of a Tragic Irony. Thucydides is content to let them speak for themselves. But that, of course, is a mere figure of speech. The facts speak as they are permitted by the artist, who states and arranges them in the way we describe as 'most telling.' Let us see, then, how Thucydides states and arranges his facts.

Too rigid a scheme would not have served his purpose. The experience of Thucydides had deeply convinced him of the importance in history of two incalculable forces, chance and human nature. He did not attempt to explain everything or even a great deal; he left that, one may be forgiven for saying, to Grote and the Germans. Although no man has said profounder things on his subject, I doubt if he had anything which could properly be called a 'philosophy of history.' He thinks that a book like his own has its practical uses because, when a certain conjuncture of things happens, the statesman may learn from its pages how human nature behaved under similar conditions in the past. But he has no formula to guide one even here. The statesman must use his own judgment. But, let a man be as little dogmatic as he likes, he must work at least provisionally with some kind of theory about the causes of things. Thucydides, like Herodotus, adopts the theory of human *Hubris* and divine *Nemesis*. Mr. Cornford in his *Thucydides Mythistoricus* has traced in the historian the whole sequence of Temptation, Insolence and Fall, and

the rest of that primitive theology and psychology which has worked itself, in slowly refining forms, into so much of the loftiest Greek literature. The proved dramatic value of the scheme may have commended it to Thucydides. Yet I am drawn to believe that its adoption by him was largely instinctive and almost unconscious. It was the way people had always felt about the mystery of human fortunes, and the appropriate language came to his pen as naturally as the language of Christian theology comes to a man who has never seriously thought about it. Even so he is studious to avoid any formal statement like that which Herodotus put into the mouth of Artabanus. Such a conception of the divine nature, we may take it, Thucydides would have regarded as childish nonsense. But the thing Artabanus was trying to explain is not nonsense, but the material of tragedy ; and if Thucydides thought of it in the terms of Ancient Tragedy, there is surely nothing to wonder at in that. Nobody is more contemptuous of the unscientific mind in historians, but nobody is more impressed by the incalculable element in history. It would be absurd to describe Thucydides as a mystic, but not more absurd than to say—and something like it has been said—that he reduced history to a science. He knew that there was at the heart of his subject a mystery which science could not explain.

It could not explain, but it could illustrate. It is the recognition of this which gives Thucydides much of his peculiar power and quality. His Irony acquires a tremendous force from its apparent substantiation by the naked facts. There is nothing like this in any other historian known to me. Carlyle and Michelet had more

of what one loosely calls poetry in them than Thucydides, but they write like volcanoes in eruption, so that their flame and detonation distract your attention from their evidence. Even a 'scientific' historian like Buckle (whom people are beginning to mention again), although he marshals his proofs with the deceptive impartiality of the statistician, is full of rhetoric and special pleading. But Thucydides is terrible. It is not easy to exaggerate the intensity of patriotism in the ancient city-state, and this patriotism had a personal quality about it which made Pericles' call to the Athenians to love their country more than a simple metaphor. Thucydides had to tell how Athens had ruined herself. The reader cannot be very sensitive who does not feel that this was for the writer a personal tragedy. But Thucydides makes no comment on the facts. He justs sets them down.

d

He begins with a rapid survey of the rise of the Athenian power until the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War, which war is his proper theme. This preliminary review, without which the causes of the War could not be understood, contains within itself the most brilliant demonstrations of every side of his genius. The opening chapters, with their astonishing reconstruction of prehistoric Greece—the picturesque narrative of the events at Corcyra and Potidaea—the speeches full of *êthos* and yet so characteristic of Thucydides—the little prose epic of the Rise of Athens—these show in turn and in almost bewildering richness the intellectual resources of the writer. And there are many flashes of his Irony.

But that naturally could not be fully developed in what, after all, was only an Introduction. It is with the history of the War proper that the Thucydidean Irony comes wholly into play.

The conflict opens with the invasion of Attica by the Peloponnesian forces. There is some cavalry fighting, in the course of which a number of Athenians fall. Over their coffins and before the assembled people Pericles delivers his Funeral Oration. The only comment I need make upon it here is this: Thucydides obviously intends us to give a cardinal importance to the speech. It is much the longest in the book, it is the most impressive—and one may add the most difficult—example of his style, and the occasion on which it was delivered was of no importance. It has even been suggested, not without the support of evidence, that the famous actual speech, of which Thucydides gives our very Thucydidean version, was delivered many years before on quite another occasion, and that the historian has purposely displaced it. Without accepting this view, one sees in the Funeral Oration the manifesto of Athenian idealism in politics. The slightness of the opportunity which the historian seizes is the measure of the importance he gives to the speech. Was he right in giving it this emphasis? Surely the world has answered that question in his favour, since what chiefly remains to us now out of all that record of battles and policies is the memory of some undying aspirations uttered by a lonely figure—for Pericles was as lonely as Lincoln—under the Athenian sunset. What other historian than Thucydides would have seen that of the whole War the most significant event was a speech?

But he saw another thing—the artistic value for his book of having the great utterance come just where it does. This is what Athens in the first high weeks of the War solemnly resolved to be. The sequel shows what she became. And so Thucydides can thus early begin to work out the Tragic Irony of his matter.

The speech is followed by two short sentences and then by this one: *They* (the Peloponnesians) *had not been many days yet in Attica when the Plague first began to show itself among the Athenians. . . .*[1] The first answer to Pericles was a crushing blow from the unseen. (He did not long survive it.) It was a horrible disaster both in its extent and its effects. It is described by Thucydides as only he could have described it. In saying this I am thinking not merely of the power of the description, but of its character. There is probably nothing which so appals the imagination as plague in a great civilized city. Thucydides had lived through these horrors, watching them in the case of others, watching them in his own case, for he was one of the few who were attacked by the malady and survived. He was therefore, as he remarks in his singular way, in a position to tell what happened. It may cause a smile in the modern literary man to see how little Thucydides makes of his material. What the average literary man of our time would do—and I am not blaming him—is to make a book or several books out of such an experience; and we should have, very likely, a great deal of what is called word-painting. Thucydides puts all he has to say in a few short chapters, so short that all together they would scarcely make up one chapter in a novel. And on a first impression the

[1] ii. 47.

style is that of an inarticulate scientist giving evidence under oath.

But even that is rather striking, is it not? It is all very well talking about the classical style, but when Thucydides writes, *Let every man then, scientific or not, give expression to his own opinion as to the probable origin of the thing and its causes. . . . I shall content myself with relating the sort of thing it was that happened*,[1] one does feel it a strange way of beginning such a story. It is as if one had taken up a Government report by mistake. It seems all the stranger when one reflects that, apart from a very few enlightened students of the new medicine, there was probably not a man in all Athens but Thucydides who did not believe that the Plague was a visitation of the wrath of God. Thucydides (you will observe) does not deny that; he has the proper scientific attitude. '*Whatever* the cause, the thing happened *so*.' Here is 'scientific' history if you please! It would be remarkable at any time; at that time, and from a man who nearly died of the thing he was describing, it was more remarkable than one can easily say. But it was intensely like Thucydides.

Then, as he proceeds with his unemotional 'objective' method, his reader begins to feel the peculiar effect of it and to recognize that the writer is not inarticulate in the least, but a master in economy of phrase. There is nothing he has failed to convey. The *Journal of the Plague Year* is not a very short book, and it is crowded with that convincing detail which none can invent so well as Defoe. Yet I feel that Thucydides has told me more about the Athenian than Defoe about the

[1] ii. 48.

London Plague. So much may one learn from what is not said. 'One smiting phrase, and then silence.' What Carlyle says of Dante may not unfairly be applied to Thucydides. All imitations—and his account of the Plague has often been imitated—are to the best of my knowledge mere essays in the picturesque compared with the original. What makes one feel this is evidently the justness of every word in the story. One feels that everything happened, as he says, 'just like that.' There is no more to be said, he implies. But none knew better that there was a great deal more to be thought and felt; and when this happens we have Irony.

The physical and mental wretchedness of the Plague helped to begin a process of moral degeneration in the Athenian people. It is clear that to Thucydides, although he never says so—he never says anything!—this was its most painful result. As the War dragged along, the disintegration of the national character went steadily on. The phenomenon was not confined to Athens. At Corcyra, for instance, the excess of party spirit drove men into a kind of dementia of cruelty. Thucydides gives the horrid details, and then passes to a general account of the moral state of Greece.[1] It is an indictment which draws its power from two sources: an understanding of political psychology to which modern experience has found nothing to add, and the style in which it is written. The effect of the chapters which describe the Plague is repeated—for the style is the same—in these chapters on the growth of party spirit in the War; but with this horror added, that what was

[1] iii. 82–84.

then in the main a sickness of the body has become a malady of the soul.

But Thucydides was not content with analysis. He would show the new spirit in speech and action; he would let the facts speak for themselves. This is one principal reason for the very special position occupied in his book by the affair of Melos. This was a little island which, being near the Dorian Peloponnese and inhabited by Dorian men, naturally wished to be at least neutral. The Athenians, however, sent a fleet to compel it to join their League. Delegates from both sides met to discuss the situation. The discussion is too long to translate at length, but it may be summarized thus:

ATHENIANS. Since there is to be no open diplomacy, we suggest that there be no set speeches, but that we take up each point as it arises.

MELIANS. We should have no objection to that proposal if we were meeting you on terms of equality. But in fact you insist on meeting us with a display of superior force.

ATH. The question before us is, what is to be done about you *now*? If you will not confine yourselves to that point, we are afraid we cannot usefully continue this conversation.

MEL. Very well.

ATH. Thank you. Now we hope the matter may be treated in a helpful spirit of realism. We may as well begin by recognizing that all talk about 'rights' is only in place between equals. You know as well as we that a State has no rights unless it can assert them by force of arms.

MEL. But surely—even if we leave 'rights' out of the question—it is to your advantage as much as to ours that the privilege (to put it no higher) of free and full discussion between victor and vanquished should be preserved. Some day you may be glad to claim that privilege yourselves.

ATH. The prospect does not alarm us so much as you may suppose. But we actually came to lay before you a proposal which should be advantageous to both of us.

MEL. To both of us?

ATH. Yes; for if you submit quietly you escape destruction, and we are saved trouble.

MEL. Why may we not remain neutral?

ATH. Because, if we let you remain neutral, it will be taken as a sign of weakness on our part, and our prestige will suffer.

MEL. But surely, from the point of view of your own security, it is an error of policy to antagonize neutrals.

ATH. Why, there are neutrals and neutrals. The hostility of some can never be really dangerous to us. The hostility of you, who are islanders, would be very dangerous to a sea-power like Athens.

MEL. It seems to us that empire must be a very dangerous thing both for the ruling State and for its subjects. It looks as if any fate would be preferable to becoming a member of it.

ATH. You are mistaken, since in your case the alternative is your destruction.

MEL. There is always the chance that we may escape that fate.

ATH. Providence is on the side of the big battalions.

MEL. We rather trust that it is on the side of justice. Nor are our hopes placed in the gods only. We have every reason to believe that the Lacedaemonians will come to our aid.

ATH. With respect to the gods, we see no reason whatever for supposing that they will be on your side rather than ours. All the evidence we can find suggests that the same rule holds among them as among us, namely that their rights are coextensive with their powers. As for the Lacedaemonians—come now, you are not so simple as to imagine that *they* will do anything for you, unless it happens to be in their own interest!

MEL. But it is in their own interest to preserve us. Otherwise they will lose the confidence of their friends.

ATH. Are you not forgetting that to pursue a just is to pursue a dangerous policy? And a dangerous policy has never recommended itself to the Lacedaemonians.

MEL. But in our case they have special inducements to risk a little. We are near them, which makes it easier for them to act; and we are of their own blood, which is a guarantee of loyalty.

ATH. Unfortunately a State in choosing its allies looks for more effectual guarantees than that. Unless you can guarantee them a superiority in striking power, the Lacedaemonians will not act. And how can they have such a superiority while we command the sea?

MEL. But is your command of the sea as complete and absolute as you assume? There is always the chance of an enemy ship getting through. Besides, the Lacedaemonians will make a diversion by land.

ATH. We are expecting that. We are quite accustomed to these diversions. They have never yet forced us to raise a siege. (A pause.) We regret that you have not thought it worth your while to discuss the question of your national security, but have preferred to talk about your hopes and a problematical future. You know what your situation is. Why not accept it? We trust that you will not allow yourselves to be blinded to the realities of your position by chimerical notions about 'honour.' It is no dishonour to submit when you cannot help yourselves. Please do not be sentimental.

The Athenians now withdrew from the conference, leaving the Melians to consider their final answer. When the parties met again, the following conversation took place:

MEL. We are still of opinion that we must reject your proposal. Our city is seven hundred years old; we will not deprive her of her freedom now.

ATH. All we can say is, we think you are making a mistake.

So the fighting began. The Melians defended themselves bravely and with temporary success. But at last they were forced to surrender at discretion. *The Athenians*, adds Thucydides, *put to death all the grown men of Melos and made slaves of the women and children. Afterwards they sent out five hundred settlers and occupied the place themselves.*[1]

[1] v. 84 f.

A doubt has been raised whether the 'Melian Dialogue,' as it is called, can be historical; whether the Athenian speakers were quite so cynical as that. Thucydides, to whom the truth is everything, is quite frank about the speeches in his History. He tried to find out, in an age when speeches were not published or reported, as nearly as possible what was actually said; where his information failed him, he put in the mouth of the orator what he thought such a person would say on such an occasion. This seems to me a perfectly legitimate practice, once you have been warned of it; and it has this advantage for the reader that he gets the characters and policies of historical personages set before him dramatically instead of in the comments of the historian. I confess to thinking that, where the historian cannot *know*, it is less misleading to follow the method of Thucydides than to tender an account of the motives which animated this great man and that. Thucydides at least gives us the truth of art, while all we can be sure about in the 'characters' which are, or used to be, written by modern historians is that the truth cannot possibly be so simple as that. In any case it is unprofitable to inquire how much of verbal fidelity there may be in the Melian Dialogue. Enough if one sees in it a piece of wholly original and searing Irony.

But (since we are dealing with a work of art) we have also to consider what function the Dialogue performs in the economy of the whole. It may perhaps be called a commonplace of criticism that the Dialogue serves as a prologue to the tragedy of the Sicilian Expedition. Melos saw the *Hubris*, Syracuse the *Nemesis*. From this point of view the History is seen to be constructed

for an effect like that of the Greek Tragic Drama. I am far from suggesting that there is no other point of view. What we are discussing is not a poem, but a history, and that makes a cleaving difference. Yet the parallel is not merely instructive; it is the key to understanding. We may remember that the myths with which Aeschylus and his fellows deal were regarded as true in substance, so that their plays were in a manner historical dramas. What these poets set themselves to do was to draw out the Irony of the thing that happened. Now this is the aim of Thucydides also. He is naturally limited by the nature of his task, which is (as Aristotle put it) to tell 'what Alcibiades did or suffered,' in fact, and not what he did in the imagination of the poet. Yet it is singular how little Thucydides is impeded by this—nay, he makes an important use of the obstacle. For by convincing us (as he does) of his stern veracity, he makes his Irony the more affecting because it seems to lie not in his own mind, but in the facts themselves.

That, of course, is the triumph of art. But Thucydides is not to be misjudged. It is possible, no doubt, by the careful selection or emphasis of details that suit the writer's purpose, to give a very satirical and, if you like, Ironical version of some piece of history. But Thucydides would not do that. It is just our conviction that he would not that sets his Irony almost alone in its kind. He does believe that the facts bear him out. And if he saw them not as they really were (if anyone knows what facts are really), but only and necessarily as they appeared in the light of his own sad and indignant imagination, the literary critic has nothing to do with that. Thucydides had for every purpose of art fulfilled

his promise to relate the thing οἷον ἐγίγνετο, 'just as it happened.'

It was in the year following the affair of Melos that the Athenians determined to send a great armament to conquer Sicily. The fortunes of this, the most splendidly equipped force that ever sailed from Athens, are described by Thucydides in his own manner. The degree to which the imagination of the man—for he did not witness what he relates—possesses him is felt not merely in the vividness of the writing, but in its controlled excitement, its sense of impending disaster. It was early morning of a midsummer day when the fleet put to sea; but already the quays of the Piraeus were crowded with spectators. The people of Athens had staked everything on the success of this enterprise, and now, when at last it was launching, they were solemnized as never before by thoughts of all that was at issue for them. It happened, moreover, that this day fell during the celebration of the mystic rites of Adonis, and the black robes of them that buried the god and the wailing for him of the women on the housetops oppressed the minds of all. But as the day broke over the Saronic Gulf and glittered on the multitude of ships, spirits rose high again. A trumpet blew. In the silence that followed all the crews, led by a herald, raised their voices in prayer. *And all that were left upon the shore, both Athenians and those whose hearts went with them, joined in the prayer.* Then, raising their battle hymn, the galleys beat out to sea, at first in ordered lines, but soon breaking formation to race each other exultantly as far as Aegina.[1]

Then everything began to go wrong. The leaders of

[1] vi. 30–32.

the expedition, Alcibiades, Nicias and Lamachus, were divided in counsel. Alcibiades was recalled to face a charge of sacrilege implying treason, eluded the officers sent to apprehend him, and carried his unscrupulous genius to the service of Sparta. Syracuse was invested, but too deliberately. In a skirmish before the town Lamachus was killed. Nicias for some time had been a dying man. A very capable Spartan officer, called Gylippus, succeeded in breaking through the Athenian lines and brought new courage and science to the defence. The Syracusans, profiting by the possession of docks while the Athenian ships rotted in the open harbour outside, built a fleet of vessels with bows specially designed for fighting in a confined space, and with the aid of this invention defeated the Athenian navy. Nicias wrote to Athens for help. The city made a great effort and sent him a fresh armament under the command of their best remaining soldier, Demosthenes. The new general instantly proposed a night attack while the impression of his arrival was fresh. The attack just failed of success, but it did fail, and that disastrously. Demosthenes urged immediate retreat. It was the only course ; yet Nicias hesitated. Invaluable time was lost. Finally Nicias gave way. And then—there occurred an eclipse of the moon. All the superstition that lurks in a beaten army flooded the soldiers' minds. Nicias himself, a man of some culture and a vast experience, was frightened into another postponement. This time delay was fatal.

It was resolved to venture all on a last stroke at sea. If they could regain command of that, at least their return to Athens would be secured. Preparations for the battle were passionately hurried on. *But Nicias in*

that awful moment, seeing how near and great was the peril, the ships being on the point of putting off; thinking too (as men will in the emotion of great crises) that when all has been done and said there is still something to say and do; once more made a special appeal to each of the captains, bringing in the names of the man's father and of his tribe and of the man himself, urging him to prove himself worthy of such distinction as might have fallen to him and of the hereditary qualities which had made Athens glorious, reminding him that of all cities she was the most free and left her sons to arrange their own lives as they pleased, and saying all the other things that men will say when affairs are brought to such a pass—the regular appeals by wife and children and the gods of our fathers—careless of seeming conventional, thinking of nothing in their loud invocations save what may be useful to meet the thing that is threatening to strike.[1] Thus Thucydides in that strange contorted style of his.

The fight then began. The object of the Athenians was to burst the boom and escape from the harbour; the object of their enemies was to prevent this. In the confined space there was no room for those open tactics for which the Athenians possessed an inherited aptitude. There was, in fact, no room for any planned battle at all. Galley shocked against galley only to find itself rammed by a third. So great was the crash and the clamour that the word of command was drowned. The pendulum of victory swayed to and fro. Meanwhile *both armies*—that is, the men on shore—*were in the grip of a fierce excitement, the Syracusan host thirsting for greater glory, the invaders dreading to find themselves in a still*

[1] vii. 69.

more cruel situation. The Athenian infantry was too near the scene of battle to take it all in at once. Thus it came about that if any happened to look at a part where their ships were winning, *their confidence would go mounting up and they would vociferate appeals to the gods not to cheat them of their salvation; while those whose eyes had fallen upon the part which was losing lifted up their voices in lamentation and were more powerfully affected by the sight of the fighting than were the men engaged; and they whose gaze was fastened where the battle was equal, because the issue remained long undecided, therefore did they in those awful moments betray even in the dumb flesh the agony of the soul within: (for they were constantly all but ruined or all but saved). While the balance hung level you could hear at one and the same time resounding through the Athenian army cries of triumph and despair, of victory and defeat, and all that babel of sounds that must be when a host is in some deadly peril. And with the men on the ships it was much the same. Long the battle lasted. Then the Syracusans and their allies put the Athenians to flight, and, driving home their advantage, with wild cheering pursued them to the shore. The scattered fleet (all but those who were taken in open water) made for land where they might and plunged into the camp. But the land force (unanimous now) all with one impulse and one great wailing groan deplored the issue.*[1]

And now they *had* to retreat. In the meantime the Syracusans had blocked the roads, occupied the passes, seized the fords. But how can one tell of these things except in the words of the master? *It was only one circumstance in their case that they were retreating with*

[1] vii. 71

loss of all their ships, in peril of their own and their city's existence—in place of all that hope. Even as they left their encampment things happened which were hard to look upon or think about. For the dead being still unburied, whenever a man caught sight of the body of some relation, grief and terror came upon him. Yet the wounded and the sick, who were being left behind, were far more grievous and pitiful to the survivors than were the dead and fallen. They did not know what to do when the sick begged pitifully to be taken, appealing personally to any comrade or kinsman they saw, clinging to their messmates when these were already moving off and following as far as they could, and then, if strength failed, falling behind with repeated moans of 'for God's sake!' so that the whole army was weeping, so that in its distraction it could hardly force itself away, though it was from a hostile land and they had already endured, and in the uncertainty of what lay before them feared still to endure, sufferings too deep for tears. And then the historian himself points out the Irony. *Nothing like this had ever befallen a Greek army. They had set out to enslave others; now they were retreating in fear of their own enslavement. They had sailed away amid prayers and glad hymns; they were going back with sounds of a contrary import in their ears.*[1]

Nicias made a speech to his men, in which he said there was good hope that the wrath of the gods against them was now appeased, that they had endured enough to expiate any sin, that other cities before theirs had attacked their neighbours and *after doing what men will had suffered what men can*, that Athens yet lived in them, *for what makes a city is the men in her, and not empty*

[1] vii. 75.

walls and ships.[1] But the wrath of the gods was not yet appeased.

The army was formed in two divisions, Nicias leading the first and Demosthenes the second. When they reached the ford of the Anâpus, that little river—but Theocritus calls it a big one—which was to receive a later, different fame in pastoral poetry, they found the enemy already in possession. They made good the crossing and resumed their march, still harassed by the cavalry and missiles of the foe. After covering about four and a half miles, they encamped at evening on some high ground. Next morning, starting early, they went down into the plain for food and water, then advanced until their road passed into a stony ravine winding about an isolated hill. Upon it they found the Syracusans.

They attacked, but the slope was steep and they had to retire and rest awhile. A thunderstorm came on. To spirits darkened by suffering it seemed that the anger of Zeus spoke in the thunder. Next day they attempted a fresh advance, but this time the Syracusans were all about them and could not be shaken off. Half a mile or so they fought their way forward. They could do no more. They came to a dead halt.

During the night the generals devised a stratagem. Lighting a great show of fires, they marched by a new route, which would take them to the sea away from the enemy, but at the same time away from the safety beyond the mountains. The excitement of the flares, the secret nocturnal march, the constant terror of detection wrought upon the shaken nerves of the men. The

[1] vii. 77.

vanguard under Nicias got away in good order; but the rearguard, comprising a full half of the army, fell into some confusion. Nevertheless dawn found them by the sea. They took the road to Helôrus, marching towards the Cacyparis with the intention of following the valley of that river into the wide interior of Sicily. About noon they were overtaken by the Syracusans, who had easily discovered the line of their retreat and rapidly pursued. These at once attacked the rearguard, surrounding it with their cavalry. The Athenians, perhaps by misadventure, more probably yielding to the temptation, almost irresistible to a force at the limits of its endurance, of hugging a temporary shelter, entered a walled enclosure full of olive-trees. They were now in a trap. At the end of the day, worn out with wounds and suffering, they surrendered.

Meanwhile Nicias with his division had pressed on, crossed the Erineus, and taken up his position on the rising ground upon the other side. Here he was overtaken next day by the victorious Sicilians. They repeated the tactics which had been fatal to Demosthenes. Surrounding Nicias, avoiding close quarters, they assailed him with missiles continually until evening. Also hunger and thirst tormented the Athenians. An attempt during the night to break through the enemy's line failed, except temporarily and at a single point. Dawn came, and Nicias must put his army in motion again. In an instant the Syracusan skirmishers were all about them. *The Athenians pushed on for the river Assinarus. What drove them to this course was the multitude of horsemen and the light-armed troops together with their own idea that their situation would be a little relieved, but also*

it was their misery and their thirst. When they came to the river they plunged into it in wild confusion, every man seeking to be the first to cross himself, although the violence of the enemy's attacks made the passage far from easy. Forced together into narrow room, they stumbled and trod on one another, some dying at once on the spear points, others becoming entangled with the baggage and floating down the stream to death. The Syracusans came and stood along the steep opposing bank and hurled their javelins on the Athenians below, most of them a huddled heap drinking greedily in the deep bed of the river. The Peloponnesians came down to these men in the stream and made a particular slaughter of them. Instantly the water was spoilt. None the less they kept drinking it, all red and muddy as it was, most of them even fighting over it. At last when the dead were piled in heaps in the Assinarus and his army was destroyed, while any elements who escaped were cut off by the cavalry . . . Nicias surrendered.[1]

The triumphant Syracusans put him and Demosthenes to death. The prisoners were thrust into the stone quarries of the city, where, *crowded together in a place at once narrow and profound, they suffered without intermission at first from stifling days, day after day, the sun beating on their unprotected heads. And night after night of autumnal cold made them ill by the violent alternation. Then for want of room they were forced to do everything in the same place ; while the piles of the dead who perished of their wounds or the change to which they had been subjected or for some other such reason kept mounting up ; so that the stenches were intolerable. Hunger and thirst combined to plague them. . . . Of all the miseries incident*

[1] vii. 84.

to men thrust into such a pit there was not one that did not befall them. . . . This was the greatest action of the war, or as I think of Greek history; reflecting most lustre on the victors and saddest for the ruined side. For their defeat was quite complete and conclusive, it was one great blow after another, they were 'wiped out' (as people say) both seamen and soldiers, they lost everything, and few returned home.[1]

And then Thucydides adds the sentence that takes one's breath away: *Thus ended the Sicilian Expedition.*

[1] vii. 87.

XI

a

Irony: the quality of the *Eiron*. He began as the man who lies low beneath the jealous watch of the gods in contrast with the *Alazon* who challenges it. He ends as the detached but not unsympathetic spectator of the drama (tragedy or comedy or both, according as it strikes him) of human life. The moral of an ancient drama is always much the same, fairly expressed, as said above, by *The Vanity of Human Wishes*. Not, observe, the Vanity of Human Virtue. Hence it rarely happens that the Ironical Man in antiquity is led to cynicism. If he be, it is arguable that he is no longer truly Ironical; for the cynic must declare himself, and that is contrary to the very nature of Irony.

It was left for Plato to take up anew the conception of the *Eiron*, and, without essentially altering, deepen and enrich it. This he did when he created the character of his Socrates. Whether that character be entirely historical or not is a question outside the study of Plato's Irony. The portrayal of Socrates in the Dialogues is a creative act in either case. And surely it is the greatest portrait in literature, greater even than the Johnson of Boswell. There is only one other figure of the ancient world who haunts the imagination like this strange genius, this humorous saint and subtle moralist of the market-place.

We see him, the centre of a group of talkers, generally standing about and arguing with everybody, sometimes reclining at table in the ancient fashion—for people were always inviting him to their houses—or stalking along in the slow, stiff-legged fashion of the wader birds. He is bare-footed and lightly clad, and the weather makes no difference to him. It made no difference even when he was on military service in Thrace during the winter, which is 'terrible' there; weather-hardened soldiers, peeping from their shelters or hurrying from post to post muffled up to the ears, gaped to see Socrates calmly strutting about with his naked feet in the snow. A squat figure with a remarkable head, with snub nose and protuberant eyes, out of which he has a way of looking at you bull-like from beneath his lowered brows. Strange eyes, humorous and kind, but curiously hard to face if you were not telling quite the truth, and exerting perhaps a kind of unconscious hypnotism. Meno said he was like a torpedo fish; he looked like one, with its bulbous eyes, and he gave you a shock like one. Alcibiades said—but it is best to quote Alcibiades himself. (He is making an after-dinner speech.)

Gentlemen:

In the commendation of Socrates which I am about to deliver my method will be the figurative. It is possible that my friend here will suspect me of trying to be funny; but the figure I shall employ aims solely at the truth. I maintain that Socrates resembles nothing in the world so much as those Silenus toys you see in the art shops. You know, the Silenus is carved with a flute or a pipe in his

hand, and if you open him up you find little gods inside. I say further that he is like the satyr Marsyas. The physical resemblance you would not, I presume, yourself deny. But there are other points of similarity to which I shall now draw attention. You are a wild character. What? You deny it? If you do, I shall produce my evidence. Next point. Are you not a flute-player? Aye, and a far more wonderful one than Marsyas. . . . The only difference is that he used a musical instrument, while you employ nothing but words: the effect is exactly the same. At any rate when we listen to the words of anyone else, even if he be quite a good speaker, nobody pays much attention to him. But when one hears you speaking or somebody repeating what you said (even if he be a poor creature), then whoever the listener may be—man, boy or woman—the marvel and the magic lay hold on us. Speaking for myself, gentlemen, if it were not that you would think me quite drunk, I would describe to you on oath the sensations which this man's words have produced in me and continue to produce. For when I listen they make my heart beat far worse than the hearts of the Dancers of Cybele, and the tears gush out; and I notice that a great many others are just as bad as I am. When I used to hear Pericles and other great speakers I had no doubt about their eloquence, but their effect on me was nothing like this. My soul was not perturbed and distressed at its unregenerate state. But this Marsyas has often made me feel that, if something did not happen to change my way of life, I could not go on with it. . . .[1]

[1] *Sympos.*, 215.

This contrast between the outward and the inward man expressed the nature of Socrates. It belongs to the very essence of the true Irony to have this double character, this juxtaposition of the comical and the serious. A better metaphor would be to call Irony the trembling equipoise between jest and earnest. A thing so delicate and Janus-faced is puzzling and therefore distasteful to the plain man. When his contemporaries called Socrates Ironical they did not mean to be complimentary. Irony to them was still the quality of the *Eiron*, the foxy fellow, the ' canny ' man, the player who did not put all his cards on the table. Such a one would ask people cunning questions, but would take care never to answer any himself. So complains Thrasymachus in the *Republic*, where we read that all the time Socrates was arguing with Polemarchus he—that is, Thrasymachus—had been quivering with eagerness to intervene. So, when the argument was finished, he *hunched himself up like a wild beast and came at us as if he meant to tear us in pieces. Polemarchus and I*, says Socrates, *gave a start of alarm, while Thrasymachus cried, " When are you going to stop this balderdash, Socrates? Why do you and your set keep up this silly ' I yield to your superior judgment ' game? If you really wish to know what the Just is, don't merely ask questions and make a parade of refuting any answer you may get. You know very well that it is easier to ask questions than to answer them. Answer yourself and tell us what you maintain the Just to be. And don't tell me that it is the Necessary or the Useful or the Profitable or What Pays, but say what you have to say in clear and precise language, for I won't take such chatter from you." Now when I*

heard this I had a dazed feeling and I was frightened when I looked at him, and I do believe that, if I had not seen him first, I should have lost the use of my tongue. (It was an ancient superstition that, if a wolf saw you before you saw him, you became speechless.) *However, I had managed to see him first, just when he was beginning to be infuriated by our discussion, so that I was able to reply to him. "O Thrasymachus," I said to him a little nervously, "don't be too savage with us. If Polemarchus and I made some mistake in our examination of the arguments, I assure you that the mistake was quite unintentional. If we were searching for a bit of gold, we would never intentionally defer to one another in the search and so destroy our chances of finding it. So you must not think that in our search for Justice, which is more precious than many jewels, we would proceed in such a foolish manner and be complaisant to one another instead of earnestly seeking to bring it into as clear a light as possible. You do think it, my friend. But I am sure it is only lack of ability on our part. So it is far more fitting (don't you think?) that we should be pitied than stormed at by you clever ones." At this he laughed outright in a very cutting manner and said, "O Lord, this is Socrates' well-known Irony! I knew it, and I prophesied it to my friends here, that you would not answer but would come the 'Ironical' over us and do anything rather than answer any question a man may put to you."* [1]

Thrasymachus is quickly made to look and even (what was much more difficult for him) to feel like a fool. But it is certain that a great many people agreed with him. They thought that Socrates' profession of

[1] *Resp.*, 336 f.

ignorance was insincere, his humility false humility. In other words, they did not understand him. The old Irony of the tragic or comic reversal of fortune they perfectly appreciated. But this new kind, which had a trick of making you uncomfortable if you took it as a joke and of getting you laughed at if you took it seriously? People did not like it, did not know what to make of it. But they were quite sure it was Irony. They called it so, and it is because they so called it that Irony has its modern meaning. For Socrates was the first to be, in our sense, systematically Ironical. It is a difficulty which appears to be inherent in the subject that I am forced to use the word Irony in a different meaning with every writer, because each is Ironical in a way of his own. It is modern and not ancient usage which has extended *Eironeia* to cover so much. This has been already perhaps sufficiently explained. But the explanation has a special pertinence in the case of Socrates, because him the ancients did call Ironical. As for expressions like 'Tragic' and 'Comic Irony,' the Greeks did not employ them and would very likely have thought them barbarisms. But they do express something every Greek recognized, or rather assumed without recognizing —which would account for its never receiving a name. The Greek simply took a certain view of life for granted; no other view struck him as possible, and so the need for a distinguishing name did not arise. The only name I can give it is 'Ironical.' But it must not be supposed that the Irony with which the critics of Socrates charged him meant anything of all that. It meant simply lack of candour. That, of course, was a misunderstanding, but they were not wrong in divining here a new incarna-

tion of the *Eiron*. And it is perhaps the enemies of Socrates whom we have to thank for the new meaning he gave to their taunt of ' Irony.'

The taunt, however, was pretty obvious, and we need not be extravagant in our gratitude to them. It is Plato who deserves our thanks. But for him the taunt would have borne scarcely any fruit at all. He agrees with the enemies of his Master in nothing else, but he agrees with them in seeing him as a new form of the *Eiron*. The Platonic Dialogues (we are informed by Aristotle) must be regarded as akin to the Mime. This statement (which no scholar takes in question) has a value not easy to explain to anyone who has not realized the full importance in ancient literature of the *Genos* or *Kind*. Every *Kind*—the Epic, Tragedy, Comedy, History and so on—had its own traditions and its own conventions, which the writer might modify, but could not break. Modern practice has quite broken down the barriers between the *Kinds* and done its most characteristic, and perhaps its best, work in the subtle mixing of one *Kind* with another. Anyone to-day who chooses to write in Dialogue commits himself to nothing. But Plato was bound to commit himself by his choice, and intended to commit himself. To what? To the traditions and conventions of the *Kind*. And these? They were much the same as the traditions and conventions of the Mime, and these again much the same as the traditions and conventions of Comedy. Now just as Comedy made the *Eiron* its hero, so did the Mime, and so, we must assume, did the Dialogue. It is true that the Mime, when it ceased to be dramatic, came merely to represent (as in the *Syracusan Women* of Theocritus)

the *Eiron's* point of view; but that only means that the *Eiron* has become the author. When Plato chose the Dialogue for his medium and Socrates for his hero, he meant to show us the *Eiron* in however wonderful an avatar. His success in this does not in the least diminish the startling originality either of the writer or his subject. One is never startled by an originality which has no origins.

There has been infinite discussion of the question how far the opinions of the Platonic Socrates belonged to the Socrates of history. It is not a question which calls for discussion here, but there is this reason for mentioning it, that it is not always clearly distinguished from the quite different question how far the Socrates of Plato resembles in character the actual son of Sophroniscus. Now the first question may be answerable, but the second (to my mind) is not. We have only one side of the case, the side presented in the Dialogues. Even that is a too argumentative fashion of speech, for we do not even know that there is any other side but Plato's. It is really no use applying to Xenophon. The Socrates of the *Memorabilia* is an old gentleman not obviously designed by Nature to lay a spell upon the minds of men; which, after all, was what the Socrates of history did. For one thing Xenophon's hero has little or no Irony. Now this clearly will not do. The historical Socrates was nothing if not Ironical; Irony, as Thrasymachus says, was 'usual' with him. But Xenophon, honest man, has not the Ironical mind, nor for the matter of that the philosophical; his genius lay in narrative. The hero of the *Memorabilia* is too like the hero of the Dialogues with the genius and the Irony

left out. The figure in Plato is at least convincing. The actual Socrates, one understands, might have been like that, even must have been like that. What the 'truth' about him is we cannot tell, unless Plato has told us. There lies for the student of literature the interest of the problem. He cannot tell how much Plato owes to Socrates or Socrates to Plato. This is the perfection of art in portraiture.

b

The Dialogue, then, is a dramatic, or at least a semi-dramatic, form. Socrates to be understood—not as a philosopher, but as a man, though partly also as a philosopher—must be studied like a character in a play. If Socrates uses Irony, it is not merely as a weapon for the discomfiture of opponents (dramatic as that may be) or as a pleasant engine for extorting the truth; he uses it because he is an Ironical character. There is, in fact, no such thing as Irony in the abstract, but we must deal with the Irony of Euripides or Thucydides or another just as we deal with poetry. Whatever generalizations we may permit ourselves to make can never (to be worth anything) be based on *a priori* considerations or the practice of a single author. This is, I think, always to be remembered; but it is particularly worth remembering in the case of Socrates, so much with him is the Irony the man himself. And with that introduction we may now let him speak in his own person.

He is addressing the Court which condemned him: *Gentlemen, I do not know the effect which the prosecution*

has produced upon you. But for my own part they almost made me forget who I am, so plausible were their arguments. Thus Socrates begins, Ironical from the very start. The Court may have smiled or it may not. Irony is a dangerous weapon to use with a jury. Socrates, however, would not have been Socrates if he had failed to use it.

There is another charge which you may have heard. It is said that I try to give people an education, in return for which I take a fee. But there is no truth in this either. Not but what it seems to me a fine thing if one could educate people as do Gorgias of Leontini or Prodicus of Ceos. . . . I must not forget to add a philosopher from Paros, who is, I understand, at present residing in our midst. I happened to meet Callias, the son of Hipponicus. (Callias has paid more money to philosophical lecturers than all the rest of the world put together.) "Callias," I said to him, "if your sons"—he has two sons—"were colts or calves, we could, if we paid him, get somebody to take charge of them who would produce in them all the good points which a colt or a calf ought to have. . . . But seeing they are human beings, whom are you thinking of putting in charge of them? Who is the expert in the virtue appropriate to a man and a citizen? For I take it that you, as a parent, have thought the question out. Is there such a person," said I, "or is there not?" "Of course there is," said he. "Who is he?" said I. "Where does he come from, and what does he charge for his lectures?" "He is Evenus, Socrates," replied my friend; "he comes from Paros, and his fee is five guineas." Then I expressed my sense of the felicity of Evenus in really and truly

possessing this art, which he imparts at such a reasonable figure. I at least would be priding and pluming myself if I possessed this knowledge. Only, gentlemen, I don't possess it.[1]

We speak of a ' new note ' in literature. Well, here is one! Not, of course, an absolutely new note, for literature can only develop out of itself, so that an absolutely new note, if possible at all, could say nothing in literature to anybody. Socrates was not the first to use Irony, but he was the first to give it this peculiarly modern quality. Irony in the modern sense dates mainly from him. When he speaks one recognizes the accent of an unbroken line of successors down to Arnold and later.

I shall try to explain to you what it is that has created my reputation and the feeling against me. . . . I have earned this reputation for no other reason than the possession of a certain wisdom. What sort of wisdom? Presumably just human wisdom. I do seem to have that. The people whom I lately mentioned may enjoy a superhuman variety. . . .

And now, men of Athens, give me a quiet hearing, even if what I am going to say appear to you a lofty claim. It is not my own language that I shall repeat, and the authority to whom I shall refer you will have his full weight with you. For the witness I shall produce to the existence and nature of my wisdom is the God at Delphi. Of course you know Chaerephon. From our young days he sought my company, and he shared in the late Exile

[1] *Apol.*, 19 *e*–20 *c*.

and Restoration of the Patriots. You know too the sort of person he was, how enthusiastic for anything he took up. Well, he once actually went to Delphi and dared to make this inquiry of the oracle—and please, gentlemen, let me repeat it without interruption—he asked if there were any man wiser than myself. So the prophetess gave the reply. It was that no man was wiser. . . .

When I heard this I thought to myself, "What can the God possibly mean? What is the solution of the riddle? I am quite unconscious of possessing wisdom, much or little. What then does he mean by saying that I am the wisest of men? He cannot of course be speaking falsely, for he may not do that." And for a long time I was puzzled about his meaning. It was with real difficulty that I thought at last of applying the method of investigation which I shall describe to you. I approached one of our distinguished men, thinking that he, if anyone, would provide me with a refutation of the oracle and enable me to prove to it, "Here is somebody wiser than myself, contrary to your assertion." Accordingly I examined this distinguished personage—I need not mention his name; he was a member of the governing class. Well, in examining him and conversing with him I could not help feeling that, while he seemed to many people and more particularly to himself to be a wise man, he was not really so; and then I tried to prove to him that this was the case. The consequence was that he and many others in the company were much annoyed with me. So I went away reflecting to myself, "I am wiser than he, for, while it is probable that neither of us knows anything very fine, he thinks he does, while I am under no such illusion about myself." . . .

After my experience with the statesman I went to the

poets, sure that they would convict me on the spot of my inferiority in wisdom. So, taking up what seemed to me the most artistic of their poems, I would put questions to them about their meaning in the hope of learning something from them in the process. Well, gentlemen, I hate telling you what happened, but the truth must out. There is hardly a man present in this court who could not have given a better account of what they themselves had written. So I had a speedy opportunity of realizing once more that poets are not moved by wisdom in their compositions, but by the inspiration of genius, just like the people who see visions and utter prophecies. (For these also say many fine things without understanding a word of them.) It was clear to me that this is the condition of poets, while at the same time I noticed in them the conviction that, because they wrote poetry, their views were of more value than other people's about everything else; which was not the case. So I left them too with the opinion that I enjoyed the same kind of superiority over them that I had over the politicians.[1]

The prosecution was conducted or supported by Anytus, representing the politicians, and Melêtus, representing the poets, although himself still 'youthful and unknown,' with 'lanky hair, an inconsiderable beard, and an eagle beak.'[2] Anytus was an honest man—a little pig-headed perhaps, as sometimes patriots are. He had suffered for his country at a time when Socrates did not allow his life in Athens to be deranged at all by the tyranny set up there by foreign arms. His son had run after the company of Socrates and had turned

[1] *Apol.*, 20 *d* f. [2] *Euthyphro*, 2 *b*.

out badly, and the old man associated the two things. He did not believe in the goodness of this Socrates, whose young friends had included Alcibiades and Critias and others who had done so much wrong to the Republic. He earnestly agreed that the man had been a corrupter of youth, and he used his honourably won influence in the community to have him put to death. He succeeded, and, being a man with a tragic grievance and, one fancies, little imagination, perhaps he was glad. It is not the sinners that hate the saint so much as the good men. And it was particularly hard to recognize the saint in Socrates, for the saints are not in the habit of reasoning, or, if they do, it is to argue the superiority of faith to reason. Nor as a rule do the saints employ an intellectual form of Irony. No doubt Anytus, as he listened to Socrates, only found his distrust harden against a man who thought his trial on a capital charge an appropriate occasion for humour. As for Melêtus, one knows practically nothing about him. There was a poet called Melêtus—a bad poet according to Aristophanes—who may have been his father; in which case the young man may have felt it an office of piety to become the at least nominal accuser of Socrates, whose treatment of poetry and poets was (and is) exasperating. But a young man with long hair (however excellent his motives) is not fortunately inspired in attacking the life of one like Socrates and provoking the anger of Plato. If what he wanted was merely advertisement, he got that.

If we were not dealing with quick-minded Athenians, we might doubt if Socrates' way of speaking quite hit their fancy. He had, like the poet, to create the taste by which he is enjoyed. We only know that the jury

was divided. Some of those who voted against him may have laughed with him, and been unpersuaded. But Socrates was not thinking of the verdict; he was thinking of quite other matters. As he thinks of these, the Irony gradually falls away from him and the *Eiron* stands up transfigured before his accusers.

If you were to say to me, my judges, " O Socrates, for this time we will not take the advice of Anytus, but we acquit you, on one condition, that you spend no more time on this search for wisdom ; if however you are convicted of persistence in this, the penalty will be death "—if, as I said, you were to acquit me on those conditions, my reply would be, " Men of Athens, you have my love and liking, but I shall obey God rather than you. As long as I have life and strength, I will not slacken in the pursuit of truth nor cease from my exhortations and explanations to any of you I may at any time meet. I will say to you what I am always saying, " My good friend, you who are a son of the greatest and most famous of cities—greatest in power and most famous for wisdom—are you not ashamed of giving your thoughts to the problem of getting as much as possible, while of honour and reputation, of right thinking and truth and the full improvement of your soul you have neither thought nor care? " And if any one of you repudiates the charge, I shall not at once let him go and take my leave of him, but I will question and cross-question and bring him to the proof, and if I think he is only pretending to the possession of virtue, I will censure him for preferring the meaner to the noblest things. I will do this to everyone I meet, old or young, foreigner or fellow-countryman, but most of all to my fellow-countrymen

because you are nearer to me in blood. God commands me to do this. . . . Listen to Anytus or not, acquit me or not, I will do none other thing, though ye slay me not once but many times.[1]

The value for this inquiry of a passage like that does not lie in its Irony, for there is no Irony here. It lies in this, that we are shown as by a sudden revelation the force and nature of the emotion that was beneath the Irony. We do not easily forget the lesson. If we were disposed to do so, the passages of heavenly beauty and eloquence spoken by Socrates in the Dialogues are numerous enough to keep us in mind of it. And upon this suggestion we may find a touchstone for other writers than Plato. Measure their Irony by the emotion you divine in it.

c

The character of Socrates is one thing and his ideas another, I have said, and it is important to keep them distinct. This is a question of method, and its design is to keep us from reasoning in a circle. But things that can be distinguished need not be disconnected. In the present case they will hardly be thought so. If the character of Socrates is so deeply Ironical, it is a fair inference that his thought also should have the nature of this Irony. But we must prove the Irony of character separately and first.

Is it proved? For Plato it is, by universal consent; and Plato's art is all that concerns us here. Nevertheless even the student of literary art can hardly be indifferent

[1] *Apol.*, 29 *c* f.

to the question how far the Irony of the Dialogues represents the Irony of the historical Socrates. It is one thing to reproduce and another to create, even although the two activities involve one another. Now, since the Dialogue is akin to Comedy, Plato might do what Aristophanes had done. I think we must build on that ground and not assume that Plato was writing Biography. If, then, he wished to idealize Socrates, there was no harm—no dramatic harm—in that. He says himself (if the Second Epistle be genuine) that all he has written belongs to Socrates 'turned young and beautiful.'[1] The question remains how far the process of transformation was carried. If the Old Comedy is to guide our judgment here, we should have to say, very far. Aristophanes cares nothing about the truth of his statements so long as they are funny and have a certain plausibility. Again, we must remember the power of tradition in Comedy as in all other branches of Greek literature. There were certain types or masks which constantly recur. One of them was the learned *Alazon*—sophist or quack. But the Old Comedy strangely combined this fondness for types with the practice of satirizing people by name. The poet selected some public character and fitted upon him the mask that appeared most suitable. Naturally the fit is often a very bad one. But what did it matter so long as people laughed?

The mask imposed on Socrates in the *Clouds* fits exceedingly ill. He is not like the Socrates we know from Plato at all. *You have seen with your own eyes in Aristophanes' play . . . a 'Socrates' . . . who professed*

[1] *Apol.*, 314 *c*.

to be ' treading the air ' and uttered a great deal of nonsense about matters of which I understand absolutely nothing. Thus speaks Socrates defending himself before his judges ; and a little later in the same speech he says that his audience will bear him out when he declares that he has *never* discussed these questions.[1] Now this, of course, must be accepted. To put it no higher, Plato was too good an artist to represent his hero as solemnly declaring something to his audience which they knew to be untrue. That is quite a different thing from writing ' imaginary conversations ' for him. It has been argued that, while Socrates quickly found that natural science had nothing to say to him, he may have studied it rather closely in his youth ; and so Aristophanes would be justified. In that case I do not see how the Socrates of the *Apology* can be acquitted of a lack of candour, for he particularizes the *Clouds* and says that the picture given there of his occupations was not true, and suggests that it never was true. The Socrates of Plato would not defend himself by a reservation any more than by a lie. So we must take his words in their plain sense and, further, believe that they were true of the historical Socrates.

Why, then, does he come on the stage as a ' scientist ' engaged in research ? I think the answer may be found in the Comic tradition. Aristophanes was not the first to ridicule philosophy. A century before his time Epicharmus was doing it in Sicily, and he it was perhaps who started the practice. It would seem that the ' Doctor ' has always been a stock character in popular Comedy, where his part (whatever it may have been

[1] *Apol.*, 19 *c*.

originally) is to mouth learned nonsense. The philosopher would seem to the comedian designed by Nature for that *rôle*. Indeed, speculation on that point is unnecessary, for we know that there arose a tradition in Comedy of bringing a philosopher on the stage mouthing learned nonsense. Now what had engaged the attention of philosophers before Socrates had been chiefly what we should call natural science. The speculations and experiments attributed to him in the *Clouds* do not suit the character of his thought at all, but they do exactly suit the physical philosophers, his predecessors. I infer that in the development of the Old Comedy before Aristophanes there had grown up a type of the Comic Philosopher with certain more or less fixed characteristics, one of them being an interest in just such problems of earth and air as engage the attention of Socrates in the *Clouds*. The poet merely claps the mask on his philosophic friend, meaning no harm by it, meaning only to be funny. It is amazingly funny, but it is not—the historical Socrates.

But if Aristophanes could deal with facts like that, why not Plato? I see no reason for doubting that the author of the Dialogues might claim for himself the same liberty as the author of the Comedies. I am disposed to think that he employs this liberty a good deal. But, after all, his object was diametrically opposed to that of Aristophanes. In the *Clouds* Socrates is the *Alazon* or Villain of the piece, in the Dialogues he is the *Eiron* or Hero. The picture in the Dialogues is not a caricature like the picture in the *Clouds*. It may be an idealization, and (if you can believe it) equally misleading. But if the idealization had no relation at all to the facts,

it would grossly fail of its purpose. The closer the relation, the more convincing the idealization, at any rate for a generation that knew something of the facts. It is not as if Plato could have any motive for creating a character entirely unknown to history. By all accounts the personality of Socrates was so extraordinary that no artist could have afforded to waste such material. *He is like nobody else alive or dead.* That was true of the historical Socrates, and it is true of the hero of the Dialogues. Plato might invent sayings and situations for him in great abundance, but they had to be 'in character.'

On the special point of Irony: we must believe that Plato's original was notable for some kind of Irony, the humorous humility of the man—a constant feature in all the accounts of him—naturally leading to this. But was it Plato's kind, or did the great artist merely seize upon this trait in his subject to express a new Irony of his own? That it was so far new, every reflecting person will believe. A man like Plato cannot even report a thing without giving it a fresh significance. But that the Platonic Irony was altogether new seems impossible, for we cannot imagine Socrates without some touch of it. Plato may have developed the old man's humour in directions and with an elegance hitherto undreamed of; but the Ironical humour was there to develop. Watch the process and you will be convinced of this.

It is through watching it that I have come to side with those—perhaps the best authorities in any case—who are unwilling to look upon Socrates as either a mystic or a realist. If anyone tells me that Socrates

was a realist—using the word in its untechnical literary sense to mean the opposite of the mystic or idealist—my answer must be, 'Then I cannot understand at all the mystical element in his nature.' And if I am told that he was a mystic, I can only reply that this was a mystic who was always making fun of mysticism. Surely he was neither and he was both. That was where the Irony of his temperament came out in his opinions. Emotion tempered by common sense, common sense transfigured by emotion—that will serve equally well as a rough definition of Irony and a rough description of Socrates' attitude to the problems he discussed.

It was the realist in him which led him to converse of *donkeys and blacksmiths and cobblers and tanners*,[1] and such 'vulgar' things and persons. It was the mystic in him which saw in that Delphian oracle the turning-point of his life. Henceforth he was, in Wordsworth's expression, 'a dedicated spirit.' But everyone knows that it is just the mystics who most love to talk of the common familiar things which have become wonderful to them; not merely *donkeys and blacksmiths*, but even *hairs and dirt*. Then there is the humility of Socrates. So strange it appeared to him that he of all men—poor, unambitious, knowing nothing—should become *the servant of the god* and his missionary to the wise Athenians! One understands, of course, that he was always conscious of an intellectual power beyond his fellows, some of whom, like that lovable Chaerephon, believed in him from the first. But the humility was genuine. Have we not always heard that God's call comes first to his Little Ones?

[1] *Sympos.*, 221 *e* f.

At certain moments of his life a Voice would speak to Socrates warning him against a wrong decision. So Plato tells us and is confirmed in this by Xenophon, not without some disagreement as to the function of the Voice. So we may fairly add this to our knowledge of the historical Socrates. Besides, it is just to a mystic that such a Voice is likely to happen. The Platonic Socrates is in the habit of referring to it as a *Daimonion*, a divine sign. The word might also mean 'a little god of his own,' and this is how many of the vulgar understood it, thus conceiving a prejudice against its owner as one that worshipped some private divinity instead of the gods of all patriotic Athenians. Socrates, of course, did not worship his Voice; he was a sane man. But the difference between such a phenomenon and a god or *daimon* was not so clear to the ancient mind as it is to the modern scholar. The half-humorous, half-deprecating way in which the Platonic Socrates speaks of his sign is merely his Irony, and does not at all mean that he only half-believed in its divine origin. The Irony, by puzzling the simple, probably increased rather than softened the feeling against him on the subject. In any case people who hear Voices, and say they have a message from God, and openly scorn most of the things the average man prizes, are not likely to be heard with favour by the average juryman. They at once confuse his head and trouble his conscience.

And Socrates was undoubtedly 'queer.' Once when he was serving in the Athenian army before Potidaea some Ionian soldiers noticed him standing quite still, thinking. This was at midday in summer. Evening came, and he was still there, rooted to the spot. The

Ionians, eaten up with their Ionian curiosity, brought out their paillasses from their huts and prepared to spend the night out of doors, partly for the coolness, but partly to see what Socrates would do. He never moved. At last, when it was daylight, he said a prayer to the rising sun and went away.[1] Such trance-like absorption is, of course, eminently characteristic of the mystical constitution. So perhaps is the physical hardihood, which did not in the case of Socrates lead to actual mortification of the flesh, but was perhaps made easier for him by the glow of an inward exaltation.

Yet, of course, for all this element in him Socrates is not completely described as a 'mystic.' There were such in his day; people who knew they were 'saved' and were anxious that others should be so too. They generally got the name of 'Orphics,' as deriving their faith from the legendary Orpheus of Thrace. In a vague way a good deal is known about them, partly from their own scanty and enigmatic records, but chiefly from reference and allusion in writers outside their circle. It is possible for the student to have a real sympathy for this pure-minded though magic-ridden sect. Moreover, if we are to be quite fair to them, we must admit that their mythology—their account of the next world and the pilgrimage there and back of the human soul—and again their theory of the body as the tomb of the soul and of life as the meditation of death, have exerted an almost incalculable influence. They had their influence on Socrates. At any rate, he was intensely interested. But he did not accept Orphicism. It was too frankly emotional to persuade the rational half of

[1] *Sympos.*, 220 *c* f.

that Ironical mind. Not that Socrates was an 'intellectualist.' No ancient philosopher was. None, I think, would even have quite understood what we mean by 'intellectualism.' On the contrary, from the reading of ancient philosophy, and especially from the reading of Plato, one rises with an almost terrifying sense of passions on the chain—*iraeque leonum vincla recusantum*—of tyrants and unreasonable multitudes and the never-raised siege of the senses. The Greek thinkers all believed that intelligence should steer the ship; but they never thought that the pilot *was* the ship.

Socrates is rather a character than the author of a philosophy. No one quite knows what his philosophy was. It is probable that his contemporaries were also uncertain about it, for several remarkably divergent schools of thought considered him their founder. He wrote no book and he was the king of talkers; these two facts will account for much. But he remains something of an enigma. A great deal of his power and suggestiveness doubtless came from just that secret something. It caused people to think and wonder. That is still the value of Socrates for us. There is no use looking to him for a system. But, while his meaning is thus doubtful, Socrates himself is convincing, that is the Socrates in Plato, who alone was able to paint so great an original. And I think we may proceed from that which does convince us—Plato's picture of the man—to that which may be less convincing—what Plato says he said. It is the *temperament* of Socrates which bridges the gulf between the sort of utilitarianism one finds in the *Protagoras* and the sort of mysticism one finds in the *Phaedrus*. Such a combination of

prudence and enthusiasm is just what one expects in the Ironical Man. It may be illogical, but logic is not everything to the Ironist. In particular Socrates (even in seeking a truer form of it) delights to use logic not simply as an instrument for discovering the truth, but as a means of stripping his adversaries naked to his Irony.

Such is the man who reveals himself in the pages of Plato. One has indeed to make a reservation. There came a time when the Dialogues ceased to be in any real sense dramatic, when the interchange of question and reply became a mere technical device for avoiding the monotony of monologue, and when even monologue was no longer avoided. In some of these later discourses Socrates either does not appear at all—as in the very long and very important *Laws*—or appears as a subordinate character. The significance of this for the student of Plato's own philosophy as distinct from what he got from Socrates is clearly very great. But the student of Irony is not concerned with it. Nor, to tell the truth, is the student of literature so much concerned as the philosopher. To follow, so far as one can, the flight into the very heavens of speculation by the mind which of all others has best combined the power of thought with the power of expressing thought—there is no experience like this. But there is a further experience in reading the *Phaedo* or the *Protagoras*. As literature, the last page of the *Phaedo* or the *Apology* is worth more to us than all the *Parmenides* or even the *Laws*. It has been thought that Plato lost his artistic power. But how can we believe this in face of the wonderful fragment of the *Critias*, which is evidently

late? What limit can one put to the artistic genius of the man who in his old age could write the haunting story of the lost Atlantis? Moreover, from first to last Plato never loses his perfect control of words, and one has constantly the feeling that he could at any moment pass from the criticism of thought to the criticism of life with results like the passage about the Cave in the *Republic* or the passage about the philosophic life in the *Theaetetus*. It may be that, as his thought became what I shall (without prejudice) call more abstract, he sought a more abstract language to fit it, just as some philosophers to-day hanker after a language of mathematical symbols. But literature has nothing to say to that.

We must be content, then, in the main, with the earlier, dramatic Dialogues. But these are sufficient to present the new *Eiron*. As we study them we perceive—what seems to be generally overlooked—the significance for Plato's art of the view he attributes to Socrates, that Tragedy and Comedy are at bottom the same.[1] The proof of that deep saying is in the Dialogues; and is it not, then, a poor conception of the Socratic Irony to think it merely amusing or controversial? Is the Irony of the *Apology* merely amusing? It was a great artistic, and no mean philosophical, discovery that true Irony is never merely that, and (as was said above) that the Comic and the Tragic Irony are but different faces of the same thing. This is the secret of that inexhaustible fascination which clings to the Platonic Socrates. In him the Wise Fool of the Old Comedy is tragically justified.

[1] *Sympos., ad fin.*

d

The ancient Mime was fond of drawing its subjects from low or bourgeois life and painting them with satirical minuteness. It was not, so far as we can judge, a very reputable form of literature, until Plato refashioned it for his own purposes in the Dialogues. The refashioning was necessary if he was to have an instrument worthy of his mind and character. Plato was not fond of low or bourgeois life, and even if he had been he debarred himself from portraying it when he chose Socrates for his hero. For the people who took pleasure in the conversation of Socrates were naturally people of leisure and intelligence, and of these two classes especially: 'well-connected' young men and the men of ideas. Hence it comes that the society depicted for us in the Dialogues is, with natural exceptions, what the eighteenth century called 'polite' society, quite different from the people one finds, for example, in the Mimes of Herodas.

The Irony of Plato naturally takes the tone of the society in which it operates. It tends, therefore, in its lighter moods to express itself with an exquisite urbanity. That has started a tradition the importance of which in the history of Irony cannot be over-estimated. It is a constant experience in reading Plato to come upon a passage of delicate mockery by which one sees at a glance the whole stream of succession running down through Horace and Lucian to Arnold and Anatole France. True, nothing is so mutable as the tone of a society, and it would be strange if fourth-century Athens were not very different from Georgian London. The

differences (for good and evil) are striking, and their effect on Plato's Irony might easily have been in some directions offensive. Yet, through the genius of his art or character, the worst we can say is that the persiflage of Socrates on occasion strikes us as not altogether in good taste, or as a little crude and obvious.

These are defects one looks to find at the beginnings of any art. And in compensation there is, I think, more variety in Plato's than in any other man's Irony. It seems possible to illustrate this within the compass of almost the shortest and the simplest of all the Dialogues, the *Menexenus*. It turns on the Athenian custom of choosing a public orator to deliver an *éloge* over the bodies of those who had fallen in battle for their country. There survives, among others, one example of such a speech which has a special interest for us, the Funeral Oration spoken by Pericles in the second book of Thucydides. That speech, the noblest in literature, was, of course, familiar to Plato, and to some extent he has it in his mind throughout the *Menexenus*. But it is not the oration of Pericles that is satirized in the Dialogue so much as the kind of speech that developed after it and largely in imitation of it. It became almost a stereotyped speech, repeating in the same old phrases the same old glorification of democratic Athens. Now this gave acute annoyance to Plato on several grounds. His artistic sense was revolted by the *clichés* and his moral sense by the orators. It is not necessary to go into that or into his dislike of democracy, because whatever is pertinent in that way will transpire in what follows.

SOCR. *Where does Menexenus come from? The Agora?*

MEN. *Yes, Socrates; in fact from the Council Chamber. . . . I went there because I heard that the Council was going to elect the public orator for the slain; you know they are going to hold the funeral rites.*

SOCR. *Yes. . . . Certainly, Menexenus, there seem to be reasons and reasons for considering it a great thing to be slain in battle. One gets a noble and splendid funeral even if one be poor, and even if one be of little consequence one gets an* éloge *delivered by clever persons, not extempore, but after long preparation. So eloquently do they speak that, whether what they say be the fact in every case or not, owing to the extreme elegance of their style we cannot but yield to the enchantment. They laud in every possible way the city, and those who have fallen in the war, and all our ancestors in the past, not forgetting to praise the present generation; so that, speaking for myself, Menexenus, I experience the most noble emotions as I listen to my own praises at their lips, and I never fail to stand and listen enthralled, feeling for the moment that I have become taller and nobler and more beautiful. And as there generally happen to be one or two foreigners in my company listening too, I immediately assume a loftier air towards them; in fact, they themselves appear by their attitude towards myself and the other Athenians to be subject to the same influences and to think our city more wonderful than ever, thanks to the persuasiveness of the orator. This feeling of enhanced importance will stay with me for more than three days. Such is the siren charm of the words and voice of the speaker as they sink into my ears, that it is not until the fourth or fifth day that I can bring myself to remember who and where I am, having till*

then been under the impression that I was to all intents and purposes dwelling in the Islands of the Blest.[1]

It is usual to speak of the *Menexenus* as if it were merely an amusing trifle. I am inclined to disagree. At least, I agree that it is amusing, but scarcely that it is a trifle. I feel that Plato is writing, or making Socrates speak, out of a strong disgust and dread of political claptrap. I suppose that claptrap of the kind satirized in the Dialogue is particularly rife in democracies, and Plato has a very mean opinion of democratic politicians. One may think that the case for democracies and their leaders is much stronger than he allows ; one may think that the sentiments he derides are more creditable both to speakers and hearers than a good deal of modern nationalism ; one may think all this and yet agree with him profoundly as to the danger for a people of history falsified in the interests of a sentimental patriotism. But Plato in the passage I have quoted does not seem to feel very strongly about it? Well, the strength of his feeling there is a matter of opinion. Whatever the feeling, the passage itself is in his lighter manner of Irony.

Well, but, says Menexenus, the orator this time will have to speak on short notice. Ah, replies Socrates, he has had his speech ready long ago. Besides, even if he had to speak without preparation, his task would not be difficult. It is easy to praise Athens among Athenians ; the trouble would come if you had to praise her among Peloponnesians. Perhaps, Socrates, answers Menexenus, you could make such a speech yourself? Probably not, Menexenus, is the reply, but I could repeat to you a

[1] *Menex., ad init.*

funeral oration I heard Aspasia deliver only yesterday. And then Socrates gives the pretended speech. You may call it, if you like, a parody of the typical *epitaphios* at Athens. But if it had not received this satirical introduction, nobody (I am sure) would have been certain that it was not serious. For it is neither more nor less exaggerated than other speeches of the same class preserved to us in the works of the Attic Orators. In this deadly similarity is couched the whole force of the Irony, which is not in the lighter manner now nor, I think, altogether a trifle. It is too long to translate, but here is a specimen: *This our constitution has always been a 'government by the best,' an aristocracy. You may call it a democracy or you may call it anything you please; but in reality it is an aristocracy enjoying the favour of the people. We have always had kings, hereditary or elected. Power is very largely in the hands of the multitude, but it distributes offices and authority to those who from time to time impress them as the best people. Lack of backing or poverty or ignorance of one's parentage has never proved a bar to promotion, nor has the absence of these disabilities brought any one honour, as happens in other States. We have but one rule: it is the man who is thought to be wise or good who enjoys power and authority.*[1] That last sentence, coming from the author of the *Gorgias* and the *Republic*, is as grim as anything in Thucydides without that secret sympathy with its object which makes the Irony of the historian so strangely affecting. At least, that is how I read the *Menexenus*. But those who still see in it only an amusing trifle will find it in their own way Ironical enough.

[1] *Menex.*, 238 *c*.

e

One does not need to ' prove one's case ' in claiming for Plato the grace of Irony. The claim has always been admitted, and therefore to support it by quotation would be at best a pleasant impertinence. It is the quality, not the existence, of the Irony that is still open to consideration. We may consider if this Irony of Plato does not permeate more deeply than is always felt the structure of the thought in these more dramatic Dialogues. Scholars now perhaps successfully avoid the danger of taking Socrates there too literally. But not to take him seriously—that is worse. He can be funny to the point of the farcical, as in the *Euthydemus*. He can gravely pursue in elaborate parody the arts and arguments of his opponents, as in the *Protagoras* or the *Cratylus*. But under this sparkling surface the man is in deadly earnest. Unless you feel that, you will miss just the thing that made Socrates ' like no one else,' the thing that (making the soul of his Irony) enabled him to confound the wise ones of the earth. What precisely it was, how can I tell, or any man ? It can only be felt.

On the day when he took the poison he was arguing with the friends who had visited him in prison. Their subject was the immortality of the soul. After some talk on the matter there was a pause in the conversation. It appeared that the company was not entirely convinced, but that they were unwilling to trouble their friend with further questions on the last day of his life. *When he heard this he gave a little laugh and said : " Well, well, Simmias ! Don't you think it would be difficult for me to convince the rest of the world that I do not consider my*

present lot a bad one, when I cannot convince even you? You are afraid that I am not feeling so comfortable as I once did. Am I to take it that you have a higher opinion of the prophetic powers of a swan than you have of mine? When these singing birds feel the approach of death, they sing more and sing louder than ever, rejoicing because they are about to depart to the god, whose servants they are. But men, because they themselves are afraid of death, falsely accuse the swans of that too, saying that it is pain that makes them sing so loud and that what they sing is their dirge. People do not consider that a bird never sings when it is cold or hungry or suffering in some other way, not even the nightingale herself or the swallow or the hoopoe, which are said to sing a dirge for sorrow. I do not believe it, either of them or of the swans, but these, I think (as being Apollo's birds), have the spirit of prophecy, and chant their vision of the happiness that follows death, and are more exceeding glad on that day than in all their life before. And I too look upon myself as sharing that service of the swans and as priest of the same god, and I think that my lord has given to me no less than them the power of prophecy, and that my leave-taking of this life is no harder than theirs. And so, if that is all your objection, you must say what you like and ask me what you like, so long as the prison authorities allow you." [1]

I think one feels it there.

[1] *Phaedo*, 84 *e* f.

XII

a

THERE could be no second Plato: the Platonic Irony died with him. But if it could not reproduce itself, it could awaken and modify the Irony in other minds. It does that still; it must have done it among his contemporaries and for many generations following. But the proof of this is not easy to find, for the solid reason that the evidence is all but entirely lost. We know that Plato was not the only writer of 'Socratic Discourses' (as they were called) in his day. Xenophon, for example, was another. But Xenophon, who was a little older than Plato, does not in any demonstrable way come under his influence, and indeed gives, as everyone knows, a very different presentment of Socrates. A fragment of Aeschines the Socratic has come to light in Egypt; it is too short to tell us if this other contemporary of Plato was influenced by him. The rest of the contemporary evidence is gone. But it is certain that even in his own lifetime Plato was admired—and not merely by philosophers—only 'on this side idolatry'; and the permanently stimulating effect of his writing has never, I suppose, been fully equalled. I therefore take it as certain that his Irony leavened the thought of his age, by which I do not mean the thought of the philosophers, who (except in the rarest cases) find it difficult enough to keep all their balls in the air at once without adding Irony to the

number. Aristotle, it is somewhat amusing to consider, wrote Dialogues too (now lost) in which he may have tried his hand at the master's Irony. But it is hard to believe that he even tried. For there is a touch of complacency about all Aristotle's thinking, and complacency and Irony are incompatible. It is not here; it is rather in the new sort of comedy which followed the death of Aristophanes and developed through the long life of Plato himself that one would naturally look to find the influence of the Platonic manner. But once again the evidence has mostly disappeared. We know, indeed, that the Middle and New Comedy, as it approached nearer a pure Comedy of Manners, came also nearer to philosophy—that is, to such moral philosophy as the plain man understands. And, on the other hand, philosophy was not above borrowing from the comic poets. You may see this in the brilliant *Characters* of Theophrastus. But these, apart from their psychological value (whatever that may be), are rather satirical than Ironical. So it is elsewhere. Much evidence of wit, of satire, of a new urbanity of style, which may very well derive in the main from Plato. But where is the Irony? One has to travel down the centuries to find it, this kind of Irony, revived in Lucian.

b

Lucian was a Syrian, not a Greek, but that is nothing. In his century (the second after Christ) it was no stranger to find a Syrian writing Greek in Rome than nowadays to find a Scotsman writing journalism in Fleet Street. That was the Roman Empire. As a matter of fact,

Lucian wandered far and wide, writing and lecturing from Ionia to Gaul, where he settled for a time as a sort of professor of rhetoric or *belles lettres*. The career of such a *Rhetor*, if he were popular, which Lucian says he was, presented the same kind of risks as the career of a popular novelist to-day, and in a higher degree, in so far as the scene of the orator's triumph is more public. Lucian tired of this life, and that is greatly to his credit. But it left notable effects upon him. It had demanded an intense and protracted study of *rhetoric*, an exercise in virtuosity, where meaning was sacrificed to infinite artifice. It was artificial in another sense, for the fashion of the time was to compose in the Attic, almost as ' dead ' then as now, of Lysias and Demosthenes. There is something to be said both for extreme attention to what English bluntness calls ' tricks of style ' and for composition in a language clearly better than the one you speak. But more can be said against them. Lucian taught himself to write brilliantly in the ' rhetorical ' manner, and when he gave it up for the manner of Plato it was not because he thought the principles of ' Atticism ' (as it was called) were wrong ; it was simply that he liked Plato better than Demosthenes. He proceeded to write in what he thought was the language of Plato. It is a very colourable imitation he gives us, although a modern scholar can easily discover solecisms in it. Genius of a high order does not imitate in that way. The style of Lucian is a *tour de force*, and all its lightness and brightness cannot give the genuine note in the comparatively clumsy and inelegant, but intensely personal, style of Plutarch or the man who wrote the treatise *On the Sublime*. It is not unusual to say or to imply that, since Plutarch's

Greek is now as dead to us as Lucian's, we are free to prefer the sparkle and ease of the latter. But for the critic to say that is to surrender to the half-scholarly. He may prefer the style of Lucian if he likes, but he must not do it on the wrong grounds. The scholar can feel the artificiality in it, and artificiality, however charming, is not a merit.

The truth is that in spite of his wit, in spite of his Irony, in spite of his style, Lucian is as like the Holy Ghost as Plato. His object, as he very frankly admits, is to give pleasure—an object which Plato thought worthy only of a cook or a rhetorician. Very well, Lucian probably thought, I *am* a rhetorician, and I am satisfied if I can give people the sort of pleasure I try to give them, which is not a bad sort, after all. It is a reasonable answer, but it illuminates the gulf between him and Plato. His true forerunners were of a different order. They were men like the Cynics or Pseudo-Cynics Bion and Menippus, especially the latter, whom Lucian in a great deal of his most characteristic work definitely took as his model, merely substituting a Platonic delicacy of phrase for the roughness of his original. The weapon of Menippus was satirical mockery, and it was Lucian's weapon too. The old Christian objection to him as a ' mocker ' is only unjustified if it becomes a prejudice and so leads to undervaluing his merits as a writer. But perhaps the eighteenth century found (as one might have expected) the word most apt to describe his method when they called it ' raillery.'

It is this method or spirit of raillery which gives unity to the voluminous ' works ' of Lucian, which otherwise

present a very miscellaneous appearance. He had a versatile pen, and he is not always equal to himself, but in all his authentic writing he is essentially the same man. This is proved where you might least expect it—that is to say, in work produced while he was still the professor of rhetoric and an authority on style—a position normally fatal both to one's own style and to one's sense of humour. It certainly had fatal effects on the other professors; you have only to read a little in them to see that. But Lucian was different. Let me give an example. It was a favourite practice of ancient rhetoric to compose an imaginary speech for some historical or legendary person. Historical exactness or even verisimilitude was not expected. What was required were fine periods. An expert in the art would choose a difficult subject in order to make good the old boast of rhetoric that it could make the weaker case appear the stronger. You put into the mouth of a speaker the defence of a paradox or composed an apology for a tyrant. You did this quite seriously and even solemnly —unless you happened to be a Lucian. What he did was to take the worst tyrant, and make him do the most impudent thing he could think of; he represents Phalaris as presenting his bull to the god of Delphi. Very likely the subject had been treated before, for Lucian, like the ancients in general, cares nothing about originality of subject. But it is not so likely that any professor before Lucian made Phalaris speak like this.

I come of a not undistinguished family in Acragas; no one can have had greater advantages in that way. I was brought up a scholar and a gentleman. My behaviour

was consistently democratic, and towards my fellow-citizens I showed myself reasonable and moderate. No one in those days charged me with a single violent or rude or insolent or high-handed action. But when I saw that my political opponents were plotting against me, and were seeking by every device to destroy me (for the State was then divided against itself), I could find no other means of security and escape, no other way of preserving the State, than by seizing supreme power and checking those individuals and putting a stop to their machinations, at the same time forcing the community to behave itself. . . . They gave me no trouble after that . . . and the city was free from party strife. . . . It made me shudder even to hear of wrong done to a boy or a girl, or of somebody running away with another man's wife, or of sending the Guards to arrest a man, or of any threat that savoured of absolutism. I was already thinking of resignation, my only concern being how I could safely do this ; for really power and the burden of office had come to seem an irksome and laborious business, and unpopular at that ; but I had not yet decided on the best way of saving the community in the future from the need of such service as I had given it. Being a simple-minded man, I was thus engaged, when my enemies began to unite against me. . . . What did I do after that? I sent for the guilty men, produced my evidence, and convicted them on every point ; and, since they themselves no longer denied their guilt, I punished them. What really annoyed me was not so much the fact that they had laid a plot against me as that I had not been allowed to continue my original policy. . . . What human being do you suppose is so brutal and barbarous as to delight in using the lash and listening to groans and viewing executions, unless he have

strong grounds for inflicting the punishment? How often have I burst into tears when others were being whipped, how often am I forced to bewail and lament my destiny, because the punishment hurts me worse and longer than them!

The tyrant proceeds to relate the famous story of the bull of bronze; how it was not ordered by himself ('I hope I shall never be such a madman as to want a thing like that!'), but was brought to him by its inventor, Perilaus. Such was the horror he conceived of the man's wicked ingenuity that he made him the first victim of the invention. Supported, then, by the consciousness of virtue, he now presents to the temple this valuable animal.

Such is the plea made by Phalaris through his representatives at Delphi. I may have something later to say (though it can hardly be necessary to say anything) about its qualities. But Lucian is not yet satisfied. He supposes that the oration was followed by a debate among the Delphians on the question whether the bull should be accepted. One speaker, we gather, was for rejecting the offer; but he was opposed by another, and it is for the latter that Lucian composed the speech known as *Phalaris II*:

Men of Delphi, I have no official connection with Acragas, nor do I represent the special interests of Phalaris; I have no private reason for liking him nor any expectation of favours to come. But after listening to the modest proposal of his ambassadors, I rise in the interests of religion

[1] *Phalar.*, 1.

and policy, by which I mean particularly the dignified policy for you, to offer you some advice. It is that you avoid insulting a prince with a conscience or diverting elsewhere an offering already promised to the god; an offering too which will be a permanent memorial of three very notable things—beauty in art, inventive criminality, and retributive justice. . . . This is not the view of the previous speaker. He waxed very eloquent on the subject of certain incidents, which he called murder, violence, robbery, abduction by the tyrant, as if he had seen them—and he all but said so—with his own eyes and had just arrived from Acragas; whereas we know that he has not even travelled as far as the boat. It is a mistake to listen too readily to the stories even of those who profess to have personal experience—how do we know they are telling the truth?—let alone make accusations ourselves in matters of which we have no knowledge. Even admitting that something of the sort alleged has occurred in Sicily, we in Delphi here are not called upon to make a fuss about it . . . or to debate in session whether people on the other side of the Ionian Sea are being well or ill treated by their ruler. . . .

The true subject of discussion is not Phalaris alone or his bull alone, but every prince and potentate who is now giving employment to the temple, and the gold, silver and other valuables that will be dedicated to the god on many occasions; for it is his interests that should be considered first. Why should we not do as we have always done in the matter of offerings? What is wrong with our old customs that we should start innovations . . . such as subjecting those who wish to make an offering to examination and trial? You see the results of our good old custom of

permitting unrestricted access to the oracle : the temple full of wealth, everybody making offerings, some even more than they can afford. If you are going to set yourselves up as examiners and inspectors of offerings, I am afraid we won't have anything to examine. Nobody is going to submit himself to trial and judgment with the risk of complete exposure when he is running into expense and paying money down out of his own pocket. Life will not be worth living if one is to be judged unworthy of giving something to religion.

That single quotation might end our inquiry. For here is Irony mistress of all her arts, so that to develop its history further is perhaps superfluous. Lucian has completely learned his lesson. That he learned it in the main from Plato is obvious and by himself admitted, so that there is no question at all as to the fountain-head of all our modern Irony, by which, of course, in this context I mean the ' comic,' not the ' tragic ' kind. But when all is said, Irony cannot be learned. What Lucian got from Plato was the technique of his Ironical manner ; the spirit of Plato was beyond him—beyond not merely his comprehension, but perhaps his apprehension. As for the technique, he in some directions even improved it. For instance, the *Phalaris* gives us the Ironical *defence*, a weapon which Lucian can hardly have invented, but which he is the first (that we know of) to put to its full use. It was the favourite and the deadliest weapon of Swift. Indeed, the *Phalaris* is a kind of prophecy of Swift, not merely in the form of it, but in the matter. Superficially, the only difference between it and a typical passage of Swift lies in the superiority

of the Irish writer in power of mind and concentration of style.

But there is, beneath this superficial difference, a difference in spirit, too profound to be overcome. Swift means what he says ; Lucian does not, or only half means it. Swift has passion and sincerity ; Lucian has so little passion (except perhaps when he was hating some successful contemporary, whom he regarded as a humbug) that it is difficult to know how far he is sincere. He is divided from Plato in the same way. It would not be fair to be too hard on Lucian for this. He is simply, in the normal Greek way, following a tradition or convention—the tradition of Bion and Menippus rather than of Plato. His style is (so far as he can make it so) the style of Plato, but his spirit is (no doubt with some modification) the spirit of Menippus. It was the spirit of the Old Comedy and the Mime. Well, you may say, and are not the Dialogues of Plato by way of being Mimes ? The answer is that he transformed the Mimic spirit. Lucian could hardly do that, still less Menippus, for whom it was at once the obvious and (one infers) the congenial course to keep to the old tradition ; that is—to put it plainly—to be personal in his satire and to care nothing for the truth. This seems outrageous until it is recognized that the truth was not expected. What the reader or the audience wanted was fun. This explains Aristophanes and it explains Lucian ; at least, it does not explain their genius, but it explains their method. If Goldsmith had written a comedy in which Doctor Johnson was represented as arguing like a Whig and a Presbyterian, he would have been treating the Sage exactly as Aristophanes treated Socrates in the *Clouds* ;

and the result might have been just as funny. The other element of ancient satire, its *loidoria* or 'abusiveness,' would not appear in Goldsmith. But it appears in Lucian along with the topsy-turvy fun. We must take him as we find him, not too seriously.

No doubt that is how the average reader takes him in any case. But since at least one very learned and honoured critic of literature appears to think that Lucian was animated by a white-hot sincerity, it appeared necessary to say something on that point Lucian could not have been sincere in the critic's sense, because he habitually and deliberately misrepresents the objects of his satire. For instance, the views he attributes to the philosophers he is constantly attacking are grotesque parodies of the views they really held. I almost think the critic is misled by the violence of the language which Lucian so often, though by no means always, employs. The violence was merely part of the literary manner. I am ready to admit—and the admission may be used, if it seem necessary, as a corrective of my estimate—that I do not derive from Lucian's work a very favourable impression of his character. He seems to me, with some redeeming qualities, 'Voltairean' without the splendid courage of Voltaire. I cannot make out that he had any convictions at all. Will anybody tell me what his religion was, or his philosophy? He often writes like a Cynic, but that proves nothing. It was part of the tradition in satire to write like a Cynic. Bion and Menippus were, or called themselves, Cynics. Satire, in fact, like the sermon, may be called a Cynic invention. The advantage of such a philosophy for the satirist is

obvious, though I should be very sorry to have it supposed that the satirists understood it. It is they—the expression seems unavoidable—who turned Cynicism into cynicism. I do not say this particularly of Lucian, although he is not free of offence; I do not say it because I do not think he felt strongly enough about human virtue either to believe or not to believe in it. If he had a philosophy, it was that of Puck. He was a professional man of letters, who could write elegantly about a broomstick, and carried that talent into satire, for which he had a natural genius. It was better fun anyway than writing flowery orations.

What is it that keeps Lucian so much alive that there is scarcely any ancient writer who is more generally read? It is no doubt his *eutrapelia*, that very Greek quality which Aristotle defines as 'educated insolence.' Lucian's wit has never quite the quality of the best things in Aristophanes or Plato; that was not to be expected. But he has at his command every form of ridicule, from the light to the rancorous. He has humour with his wit and inventiveness with his humour. Too much, indeed, may be made of the inventiveness. Its most famous exercise is in the *True Relation* (*Verae Historiae*). But the *True Relation* is not, any more than anything else of Lucian's, in a manner which was his own invention. The admirable Photius tells us[1] that the 'root and fountain' of it was the work of one Antonius Diogenes. This was a long work, in twenty-four books, and the pleasant title of it was *On the Wonderful Things beyond Thule*, or something like that. It was full of wild "romancing," told with a gravity of verisimilitude which

[1] *Bibl. cod.*, 166.

at once delights and shocks the Patriarch, who does not fail, however, to note that it was (in his opinion) the first novel. The stories in it were based upon or imitated from similar stories in the less responsible—or shall we say the more uncritical ?—historians ; and Antonius had the brilliant idea of prefixing a list of ' authorities ' to each of his preposterous ' books.' The whole he dedicated to his sister, who was a learned lady. Who would not read such a book ?

But there was too much of it. Lucian does not make that mistake, for the *True Relation* consists in no more than two short ' books.' That, one takes it, is about the true length for a *jeu d'esprit* of the kind. The *True Relation* has been wronged by injudicious praise, by comparing or even preferring it to Rabelais' book or to *Gulliver*. In genius and in style it is, of course, not worth a chapter of either. Yet there was something remarkable about a *jeu d'esprit* which could give, directly or indirectly, the suggestion of such masterpieces, and not only of these. What was that ? It was not merely the idea, brilliantly happy as that was, for the idea was taken from another man, who had apparently almost drowned it in detail. It was not particularly the wit, for Lucian is wittier elsewhere ; nor the humour, which is of rather a moonshine quality. It was not the style, although no doubt it has been an immense advantage to Lucian that he is one of the ' easiest ' of ancient writers. It was the Irony.

The want of profundity in the Irony need not disturb us. It was not meant to be profound. Once we recognize that, we can abandon ourselves to the enjoyment of its dexterity. Only the introductory sentences are (from

our point of view) a blunder, for they carefully explain that what is to follow is *not* true. Apparently Lucian could not quite trust his readers to see that for themselves. But it is due to him far more than to anyone else that readers have been taught to do without such explanations. For the rest of the *True Relation*, it is done with perfect competence. No doubt modern taste would prefer less extravagance in some of the episodes and a greater abundance of 'realistic' detail. But ancient taste has as good a right to exist as modern. The important thing is that both the fantastic invention and the realism are there, in Lucian's book, and are combined for a satiric purpose. That he was anticipated in all this by Diogenes is interesting, but of no great moment, since the only thing that counts for much is the art with which the combination is done.

The narrator of the story was swallowed by a sea monster of an incredible bigness, and spent a long time in its belly. At last, *feeling lonely and finding life in the whale intolerable, I tried to think of some way of escaping. First we decided to dig a hole in his right side and escape in that way. But after beginning the job and doing about half a mile we gave it up as useless and resolved to set the forest on fire and kill the whale in that way, when (if our plan answered) we should probably find it easy to get out. We set fire first to the timber in the region of his tail. For a week he paid no attention to the heat, but on the eighth and ninth days we noticed something the matter with him. At any rate he was not so ready opening his jaws, and when he did he soon closed them again. Finally on the tenth and eleventh days he began to mortify and smelt vilely. On the*

twelfth it suddenly struck us all at once that if we did not prop up his jaws when he gaped, so as to prevent them from closing again, we should very likely be shut up in him when he was dead, and perish there. So we shored up his mouth with great beams and got our boat ready, taking in provisions and all the water we could. Skintharos was to act as skipper.[1]

Now that, it may be said, is ordinary Jules Verne stuff. So much may, up to a point, be admitted. But in the first place, Jules Verne stuff is very good in its way; and secondly, it is very remarkable to find it written in the second century. Then, the spirit is totally different. Lucian employs 'realism,' as Swift used it, merely to add an edge to his Irony. Just as in *Gulliver's Travels* the admirable verisimilitude of the details insensibly prepares the mind to entertain ever wilder flights of misanthropic invention, so is it in the *True Relation*, except for this, that Lucian is never truly misanthropic, but only rather cynically amusing. His narrator comes at last to the Islands of the Blest and the Elysian Fields. He finds there Socrates. *Rhadamanthus was said to be annoyed with him and to have threatened more than once to throw him out of the island, if he went on chattering and would not give up his 'Irony' and enjoy himself. The only absentee was Plato, who was said to be living in his own* REPUBLIC *under his own laws and constitution. But the great favourites were Aristippus and Epicurus with their followers, pleasant hearty fellows and three-bottle men. There, too, was Aesop, whom they look upon as their recognized funny man. Diogenes, to be sure, was such a different man that he had become Lais's husband and*

[1] *V. H.*, ii. *ad init.*

would get up at any time when he was drunk and dance and start ragging. On the other hand, the Stoics were not represented ; the story was that they were still climbing the Steep Hill of Virtue. . . . The Academics, they said, wanted to come, but were still reserving their judgment and engaging in philosophic doubt ; in fact, they had not even arrived at a conviction that such an island existed. Perhaps too they had another ground for dreading the judgment of Rhadamanthus, since they had been responsible for abolishing any standard of judgment. Many of them were said to have started to follow new arrivals, but fell behind and turned back through constitutional inability to form a definite opinion.[1]

The judicious will perceive from this alone that Lucian is the father of much undergraduate wit. But this impression is only one of many received by a man of any reading who takes Lucian in his hand. Such a man is constantly reminded of this or that current of literature which seems to flow direct from Lucian, or to have been diverted by him, or to receive a tributary from him. I am not thinking much of mere imitations, which have been numerous in many languages, especially imitations of the *True Relation* and the *Dialogues of the Dead*. That, any clever man of letters can do, and do better than a genius like Fielding has done it. I am thinking rather of his general effect on the modern mind. How much, for instance, does the literature of the eighteenth century in England, and still more in France, owe, not merely directly, but indirectly, to Lucian ? I could not attempt to make that estimate, but I am sure it will seem very high when it is made. He has a special appeal to the

[1] *V. H.*, ii. 18.

Gallic, and perhaps the Latin, mind ; but his influence has been great in England too. It was not great upon Swift, who, if he borrowed a hint, developed it in ways inimitably his own, merely lighting, as he expresses it, his candle at another man's fire. On the other hand, anyone who has considered the genesis of *Utopia* and the mind of its author will be ready to accept a recent suggestion that the book owes something to Lucian as well as Plato. The same is true of *Imaginary Conversations*, although the debt of Landor is one of form rather than spirit ; of Plato, indeed, Landor professed to think but little. It is, however, not any particular example of Lucian's influence but its general diffusion in modern literature that is striking. One may perhaps contend that the light treatment of serious subjects (meaning by that what a journalist would mean) was first brought effectively into European prose by Lucian.

When he wrote, Christianity was a thing one might safely despise. Within a century and a half of his death it was the official religion of the Empire. The Church looked with disfavour on Lucian, who had treated the Christian religion with a certain mockery and was thought (perhaps rightly) to be an atheist. So he gradually ceased to be read. His rediscovery was one of the events of the Renaissance, for it meant in great measure the rediscovery of Irony. It was from Lucian that Erasmus learned the use of the deadliest weapon in controversy. The *Encomium Moriae* (' Praise of Folly ') is exactly like a piece of Lucian. The still more famous *Colloquies* are full of Lucianic wit. Rabelais owes something both to Erasmus and to Lucian, and so the

Greek's mind passes into modern literature. It is true that Erasmus and More and Rabelais only 'lighted their candle at his fire,' and being men of much richer and profounder nature have added a new significance to Irony, which ought not to be, as it so often is with Lucian, mere 'educated insolence' or a trick of style. But he gave the fire.

XIII

a

Of Greek Irony the history is clear down to Lucian, and owes nothing to foreign influence. It was therefore proper to trace this development to what may be taken as its natural conclusion before dealing with the Roman development, although that began much earlier than Lucian. But now perhaps something ought to be said about the Latin masters of Irony. It need be very little. In the first place the Greeks showed the way ; and while they did not—how could they ?—exhaust all the possibilities of Irony, they seem to have adumbrated all. This book is not a history of the subject, but an introduction to its history. My purpose, then, is fulfilled if I have shown how Irony became what we now mainly understand by it, and this can be done without travelling out of Greek literature one inch. In the second place, the actual quantity of pure Irony in Latin literature is, in comparison with what we find in Greek, inconsiderable. To disparage the Latin contribution is the last thing I should wish to do, the more so as I think the tendency in England is to undervalue Latin literature in general. But Irony was not native to the Roman mind in the way it was to the Greek. The Roman strength lay elsewhere.

b

Of all that survives to us of Latin literature before the time of Cicero by far the greatest part consists in the Comedies of Plautus and Terence. This accident, as it is a singular, might appear also a fortunate one for the student of Irony. But, in fact, he gets no advantage from it worth the mention. These Comedies are all translated or adapted from the Greek, so that whatever Irony is in them presumably comes out of the originals. There is very little in any case. Plautus and Terence did not take Aristophanes for their model, but the writers of the Middle and New Comedy, whose art was quite different from his. Their art, quite in the modern way, was largely spent in the construction of the ingenious and surprising plot, while Aristophanes has always a very simple plot constructed on the expected lines. His art, then, (as we have seen) is to develop the Irony of the situation in which the Impostor, obvious from the first, struts to his predestined fall. The poets of the later Comedy are precluded from using that effect by the need of keeping the secret of their plots ; so that, while Irony may, of course, come in, it is not inherent in the very nature of their art as it is in that of Aristophanes. Even so, one might have expected it to come in more than it does. One might go bail that so fine an intelligence as Menander, with the example of Plato before him, must have been very capable of Irony ; yet it is not easy to show that from the considerable fragments of his plays. In any case, the riotous genius of Plautus, the inexhaustible inventor of comic speech—so much more vital than Menander that we cannot pretend to be sorry

at the result—was likely to sweep away any of the more delicate forms of Irony in the torrent of his farce. Terence is much more like Menander, yet he also does not deal notably in Irony.

Nor yet does Cicero himself. Irony no doubt is to be found in him, both grave and light. But it is (if the expression will pass) rhetorical Irony. This was part of the complete orator's equipment; and therefore Cicero mastered it as he mastered every other part of oratory. But it does not spring from a sufficient depth in his nature to make him in any way original here. He was not in the least Ironical by temperament. Irony suggests by reservation. Cicero found it difficult to be reserved about anything, particularly his own emotions; and as the expression of any emotion was as easy to him as the emotion itself, he lets himself go on the tide. It was rather different with Demosthenes, who is more concentrated than Cicero. But that does not make him any the more Ironical; he is too vehement for that. Such vehemence is hardly capable of the check and return upon oneself which is involved in Irony. Sarcasm, which is sometimes mistaken for it, they both have at will. In general the oratorical mind (I think we may say) is not prone to Irony. The orator aims at more obvious effects as a rule; and even Demosthenes and Cicero, even Bossuet and Burke, tend to sacrifice everything to emphasis. They are quite right to do this, if the emphasis be just and if it produce the effect at which they aim better than Irony, which is always apt, unless it be rather blunt and obvious, to miss its aim with a large audience and to fall flat. That is why I have ventured to call the sort of Irony one does occasionally

find in these great writers 'rhetorical,' as being a somewhat bastard variety of the genuine and quintessential sort. And that also is why I am content to say little about it.

Of Varro there might be more to say if we possessed what he wrote in the manner of Menippus. On the other hand there might be not. It is much more probable, from the scanty evidence we have got, that his line was plain satire. Still, as Newton said in the course of elaborating the greatest hypothesis in science, *hypotheses non fingo*. It is a maxim which seems applicable also to Caesar. Even the simplest reader can hardly imagine that the mightiest Julius has exposed his whole mind in the *Civil War* or even in the *Commentaries*. But the cause of the reservations there is political and not artistic. Inscrutability is not Irony, though it may conceal it, as with Lord Beaconsfield and perhaps with Caesar.

But in Lucretius there is surely Irony, though of the strangest kind. As there has never been a poet quite like him, so he is Ironical in a way of his own. Lucretius believed that the soul perished like the body. That has never been an uncommon belief, but then people believe so weakly, while he believed with the intensity of a great poet on the verge of insanity. That makes a difference. I have a theory, which I have outlined elsewhere,[1] of how he came to feel like this. But whatever may be the true explanation, there is no doubt about the feeling. He must at one time have been touched by what in a modern is called religious melancholia. He speaks like a man who has escaped from Hell. Suddenly, in reading or hearing the doctrine of Epicurus, it had broken like a

[1] *The Greek Tradition*, p. 171.

great light upon his mind that death was the end of all for us, that religion was a lie and Hell a fable. The sense of deliverance in his poem is wonderful. It makes him notice the simple creatures of earth and common sights of the world like things loved long since and lost awhile. But when he looks round upon his fellow-men and sees them so passionately struggling in the net from which he himself had broken he is possessed by a feeling too tragic for laughter and too pitiful for contempt, but not without a tincture of both. Of this feeling the chief expression is in the third book of the *De Rerum Natura*. It has been called satire, and satire it is in a way. But it is mixed with the intensest sympathy, and thus takes on what I should be prepared to call an Ironical character. A comparison of Lucretius with Mr. Hardy will suggest what I mean. Not that the comparison will go very far. The Roman would have thought that the representation of man as the sport of Heaven or Destiny was just as misleading, just as much 'religion,' as belief in a life after death. What he says is that fools make a Hell of this life for their own unhappiness, and that God does not care. Life's little Ironies seem comparatively tolerable in the face of that universal Irony. And yet it is Mr. Hardy rather than Lucretius who is in the tradition of the old Tragic Irony. Indeed, it was just against the tradition that Lucretius was fighting. He certainly never thought of himself as Ironical. By what right, then, may we call him so? Because the Irony of his thought was so natural to him that he noticed it no more than breathing. Therefore, it may be said, it was not Irony. I make no objection to that criticism. But anyone who, considering the history of Irony, should

leave out the influence of Lucretius would, I am sure, be deeply in error. Consciously or not, he made Irony cosmic. It was only Epicureanism, after all, you may argue. Yes, but as I began by saying, he felt it so intensely. Atoms and void for such a passionate heart!

And after Lucretius, though one may pass the vivid sarcasm of Catullus and the melancholy of Virgil, which could not be called Ironic because it has made sorrow only beautiful, one cannot pass Horace, whose Irony is not the least delightful of his qualities. It is entirely different from that of Lucretius, because Horace is an entirely different person, as different as Herrick from Milton. It sounds paradoxical in a modern ear that it was Lucretius and not Horace who was the professed Epicurean. But that is because Epicureanism has largely changed its meaning, except, of course, for the student of philosophy—a result due more, I believe, to the prejudice of the plain man (shocked at the very suggestion of making pleasure the end of life) than to the misrepresentation of philosophical opponents, though there was plenty of that also. Whatever Lucretius may have been, he was not a pleasure-seeker in the Piccadilly sense; indeed, no man has written more tragically about the results of that scheme of life. With respect to Horace, no one supposes that he was merely a pleasure-seeker or what is called a man of the world. His chief delight was to escape into the country and there engage in the dire toil of giving that inimitable turn to his verses. But obviously he would seem a less incongruous figure in Piccadilly than Lucretius. He professed no particular philosophy. That is the normal attitude of the satirist in antiquity, and, for purposes of satire, is sometimes

assumed by a writer who, in fact, does have a particular philosophy—for example, Persius. But Horace is not like that. He is not a consecutive thinker, and the only logic he cares for is the logic of his art. It is largely a matter of temperament. The full creed of Epicureanism or Stoicism in his day was too like a religion for Horace to be quite comfortable with either. He lacked passion and he lacked conviction (terrible deficiencies in a poet); but it is their very absence which gives him that lightness of touch which makes other men's 'odes' and other men's satire seem heavy-handed by comparison. So much for his art. For his 'criticism of life,' the attitude of 'wondering at nothing' (*nil admirari*) naturally tends in a nature of any richness to find expression in Irony. Accordingly we find Irony in Horace, but not more, indeed rather less, than we might expect. To be sure one scarcely looks for Irony in the *Odes*, though, if one does, it may be found. The *Satires* and the *Epistles* (to which you may if you like add the *Epodes*) are the likely places. In them we strike something like a vein of Irony.

But it is never very rich and it is rather sadly intermittent. There is a great deal, naturally, of mere satire. This is never rancorous, although it appears certain that the satire in Lucilius, his chief Roman model, and in Greeks like Bion (whom he mentions) was nothing if not bitterly personal. This change in tone is clearly due to Horace, because we see it happening in his satirical writing, which begins with a certain asperity and ends in something which has made people call him genial. This is exceedingly to his credit, not only morally but as an artist, for to show rancour is bad art. On the other

hand, he was capable of vulgarity. This may be disputed by his more uncompromising partisans, and one must admit that the question of vulgarity is involved in that of taste, about which there is proverbially no disputing. I therefore do not dispute but merely recall the first instance that comes to my mind, the description of a dinner in the last satire of the last book. Here again he was following tradition, but one expects a better treatment of it from Horace. Can one satirize vulgarity without being vulgar? Surely one can, and Horace has no excuse but—the satirical tradition. For him the excuse is hardly good enough. He must plead it again in defence of certain poems and passages of a really infamous grossness. These are hard to forgive, because they have not the excuse of passion and are mere literary exercises in obscenity. 'Other times, other manners'—including literary manners—and it would show at once a lack of charity and a lack of knowledge to bear too hardly upon Horace, the most 'clubbable' of poets, for doing what it was the fashion to do. But we cannot help thinking it an ill fashion. And it is just because we like the man so much that we feel so uncomfortable when he says unforgivable things about old women, or explains how little of a snob he is, or criticizes other poets ungenerously.

What is it that makes one like him? I suppose the only answer to that—and it is no real answer—is that Horace is so very human. It is no real answer, because we do not know what it is that makes a man seem human. It is something that is felt, not understood. You like him for the way he speaks about his father, for the way he speaks about Virgil, for his humorous self-appraisement, for his witty amiability. Is it not extraordinary

how many sins are covered by a witty amiability? It is scarcely fair to the Miltons and Wordsworths, but it seems we cannot help ourselves. Yet what, after all, does the practical philosophy of Horace amount to? Little more than the trite and disreputable one of wine, woman and song. He was, in the modern sense, an epicurean, and that is none the less true because he enjoyed life with the triple fastidiousness of the artist, the student and the man of delicate health. The English love to see a man enjoying himself, partly from a kind of animal sympathy, partly because we feel him to be well disposed to all the world, including ourselves. So Horace has always been a favourite in England. Men who find it difficult to 'keep up their Classics' are to be discovered in all sorts of places still clinging to their Horace.

These readers are not the 'men of the world' to whom it is said that Horace makes a special appeal. If men of the world have quoted him for their own purposes, it is the students who have loved him. It is not so much what Horace says that matters as the way he says it. He is the least original of thinkers and the most original of artists. Even in his art he owes everything to predecessors except the final turn of the phrase, but that is so much his own as to be strictly inimitable. Horace himself—and this does not at all contradict what I have been saying—was essentially a man of the study and not of the street; and that is why the student appreciates him best. No doubt the poet had to a certain extent 'mingled in the gay world without exemption from its vices and its follies,' but it was not the gay world that held him; it was the study of his art. The combination in a man of epicure and artist or of epicure and student

is notoriously not uncommon. When Horace came in the *Satires* and *Epistles* to ' moralize his song,' the double combination came out in him. He revealed himself as a student of life. Whatever his experiences may have been, he was not such an ass as to suppose that ' seeing life ' was the proper way of understanding human nature. To understand that you must first learn to read your own heart. Some never learn to do that ; and if you do not have the instinct or capacity to recognize what is ' true to life ' when you see it, books will only make you worse. But if you have it, books—that is to say good books—will teach you a wonderful amount. There is hardly a sentiment in Horace which he did not find in a book. But what of that ? He knew the human touch when he met it, and he chooses and combines the sentiments in a way that mere study or even observation could never have taught him.

If we look for the most Horatian of English writers we may find him, not among the poets, but in Addison. Pope, in his *Imitations of Horace*, very far excels his model in wit and point and pungency, but Horace was driving at a different effect. This one finds better realized in Addison, for all the disadvantage of writing in prose. Of course, in poetic imagination, in splendour of words, the English writer falls out of the comparison, which in any case cannot be pushed very far. But there is something Horatian in the curious felicity of Addison's language, in his lightness and correctness, in his art of making the commonplace look as if it were not commonplace, in his delicately Ironical sympathy with human nature. These are no doubt admirable qualities, and explain a reputation which, both in the case of Addison

and of Horace (in the *Satires*), critics have sometimes found it hard to understand. The Irony of Addison is more constant, more delicate and more sure. Horace you cannot trust in this matter. Too readily his Irony roughens into mere satire or slips into bad taste. But when it comes off—when we get that pleasant didacticism or *causerie* faintly tinged with Irony—then Addison is overcome on his own ground. And then Horace's form! Nobody, not even Shakespeare, is quite so quotable, and nobody in the past has been more quoted. If he had been less inimitable, his influence would have been more obvious. We must therefore be careful not to underestimate it. So far as Irony is concerned, he did little to develop its resources. But he did something more important: he rescued it from the satirists and the rhetoricians; he gave it a new charm.

The reader of Ovid is frequently conscious of Irony, but in this poet it is mostly incidental, or even accidental. He treated mythology in a modern spirit—modern, I mean, to him. He had a sense of humour—a thing not noticeably present in most Latin poets—but he does not set out to be funny. He neither believes the myths nor disbelieves them. He does not take them seriously enough even for that. They are just stories to him, as they were to Keats and to Morris. As a mere story-teller he is better than Keats and perhaps than Morris, and that although his witty ingenuity is always leading him into irrelevance. He keeps you interested and the story going. He differs from them, more particularly from Morris, in making no attempt to archaize his style. It must, of course, be remembered that a certain amount of archaism is necessary to all serious poetical style—or

at least the ancients thought so. Moreover, as we have so abundantly seen, styles differed with the differing literary Kinds. So Ovid (who tried many Kinds) does not always write in the same way. To the *Metamorphoses*, for example, he gives a certain epic flavour. But even there he is modern. You will see that if you compare the *Metamorphoses* with the *Aeneid*. Virgil, largely by the mere magic of style, recreates the Heroic Age ; by magic of style suspending our disbelief. Ovid cannot do that, and does not try to do it. He stands to Virgil much as Dryden stands to Milton. Both he and Dryden were more ' modern '—and with this result, that their narrative style is obsolete, while that of Virgil and Milton is not. Virgil was right because he saw, or felt, that a certain gorgeous archaizing diction was suited for describing ' a past that never was a present ' ; and Ovid was wrong because he tried to present this past as if it were a present. The result in his case is a contrast between matter and manner which strikes us at one time as witty, at another as incongruous, or, again, as Ironical. So he deserves at least a word in this book ; for his influence (though over now) was prodigious.

On the other hand, the influence of Petronius Arbiter is purely modern, beginning with the discovery at the Renaissance of the *Satyricon*, or what survives of it. It is an influence which has been to a considerable extent unacknowledged and underground, but it has not been unimportant. It would be very important indeed if we could fairly call Petronius a novelist and compare him with Fielding. The *Satyricon*, however, can be called a novel only by an extension, and perhaps abuse, of the word ; while if he is to be compared with an English

novelist, Smollett and not Fielding is the man. In point of fact, Petronius was not himself creating but only following a fashion. His book is a medley of prose and verse in the manner and tone of the Menippean Satire, while it also carries on a tale of the sort generally known as the Milesian Story. The fusion was easy because realism in treatment and indecency of subject was traditional in both, and in the latter perhaps invariable. One rather assumes that it is to the Menippean element that we owe (what concerns us here) the Irony of Petronius. What an Irony it is! He has as little confidence in human virtue as Swift himself; but he goes beyond Swift: he does not believe it matters. Swift in his strange way is in love with the virtue he cannot find and is white-hot against the vicious. They merely amuse Petronius. There is not a character in the *Satyricon* that is not either vile or vulgar or both, and that in the extreme degree. The author is quite alive to this, and exposes them with what I can only call cynical relish. He writes brilliantly. His style, marvellously modulated to suit the different speakers, is the most vivacious in the language. The value of the book as a picture of life in the Roman world is inestimable, if we remember that what it pictures is the worst side of that life. Whether such a subject was worthy of the witty mind which analysed it is another question. Moral depravity has at least a pathological interest; vulgarity in his subject is merely a handicap to the artist; the combination of the two is pretty dreadful. Of course, everything depends on the treatment, and the brilliance of Petronius' treatment nobody will deny. But is it possible to read him except in little doses? It depends, I suppose, on

the amount of interest a reader takes in the way fresh-made millionaires eat their soup.

So far as the *Satyricon* has a plot at all, the episodes are strung on a single motive like beads on a string. Nothing could be more unlike the organic structure of *Tom Jones*. The wandering, disconnected story is characteristic of the kind, as one sees from the infamous little masterpiece of the *Lucius* (which may or may not be the work of Lucian) and from the *Asinus* of Apuleius, which deals with the same plot as the *Lucius*, with less economy of words but with a finer humanity to relieve it. Characteristic also is the crying indecency. It comes originally, we may probably believe, like the same quality in Mime and Comedy out of a 'sacred' mode of behaviour in primitive religion, a naïve manner of worshipping a god of fertility and thereby stimulating that fertility by imitative magic. So conservative in such points is ancient art, the freest in spirit, the least changeful in form and matter. One is not surprised at the grossness in Petronius and Juvenal. It was evidently congenial to them, as it has been to some greater men than they. But it is surprising in Horace and still more surprising in the too early dying Persius, whose singularly attractive character transpires through the brief authentic account of him which has come down to us from antiquity. Strangest of all, Plato himself so far compromised with the tradition that in his *Symposium*—a banquet was one of the stock subjects of the Mime—he has reproduced a long anecdote of Socrates and Alcibiades incredibly difficult to tell without offence. Petronius, unlike Plato, would have revelled in the offence. Is it not a strange history—from the obscenity

of the Faun, innocent as an animal's, to the pathology of sexual perversities in the age of Nero, stated with unflagging zest and without the slightest symptom of moral nausea? The *Satyricon* is the dissection of human depravity by a surgeon whose only feeling is amused contempt. It is that feeling which gives the book its undoubted Irony. I can only repeat, What an Irony!

It is, on the contrary, invective that is the weapon of Juvenal, although he has flashes of Irony too. But there are rather more than flashes of it in Persius, whose work has been so variously judged. His style is a singular one. It is markedly influenced by the Horace of the *Satires*. So young a writer is sure to be very much under the spell of his favourite poet. But it is not the graces of Horace that Persius admires; it is the strong fibre which gives the Horatian style its admirable pliability. This fibre Persius twists into something hard, contorted, often repellent, but never negligible. He is apt to torture words, and yet he succeeds in making them obey his will. What he writes is constantly queer and crabbed Latin, but it is Latin. It tastes harsh and strong, but it tastes of the old stock, whereas brilliant rhetorical poets like his contemporary Lucan and his successor Juvenal are too ready to sacrifice idiom and even meaning to mere point; as when Lucan says of Caesar in a line which I quote because it is always being quoted, *nil actum credens cum quid superesset agendum* ('thinking nothing done while anything remained to do'), which looks as if it meant something fine, but in fact appears to mean nothing at all. And rhetoric is as dangerous to idiom as it is to meaning. Juvenal, adopting

the pose of the plain blunt man, writes in a style whose merits for its special purpose I need not praise, but which is really as artificial as Ovid's. It is versified declamation. You are not asked to think, but to feel. The style of Persius is that of a man curious—over-curious—about words, but forcing you at every step to think what he means. It is not every young man who writes like that.

It is really impossible to give his quality in translation—the mixture of the grand style and the colloquial, the learned obscurity and the strange sudden word. Here is a passage which Rabelais remembered : *I have not taken a pull at the Horse Spring*—Hippocrene—*nor can I remember to have had a dream on twin-topped Parnassus qualifying me to step before the public a poet while you wait. The Heliconian Maids and studious-pale Pirene I surrender to those whose busts are entwined with the gadding ivy. Half an outsider, I ; yet bring my poetic tribute to the Ritual of the Bards. Who taught pretty polly to say 'Good morning' and the magpie to imitate human speech?* Messer Gaster, Master of Arts, *who giveth wit at need and hath skill to compass an utterance beyond nature. Let but a hopeful glitter of Deceitful Lucre take the eye, and you would think that all the gentlemen ravens and lady pies of poesy had voices sweet with the nectar of the Muses.*[1] The matter is sheer commonplace ; the style is not. We cannot call it a new kind, but it is somewhat a new manner, of Irony.

And so we come to Tacitus. Of him I shall have less to say than may perhaps even in a summary review of the Roman contribution be expected. I remark this

[1] *Prologue.*

because there appears to be a rather general impression that scarcely any ancient author is more full of Irony. But what is Irony? It is not, of course, pessimism; it is not satire; it is not innuendo. These three you will find in Tacitus, and find on almost every page. But surely the chief thing about Tacitus is that he is constantly seeking emphasis. He will be at all costs intense. Now I do not for a moment deny that he might have achieved his effects by Irony; I do not even deny that he frequently does so achieve them. But he prefers the direct attack. His style is fundamentally rhetorical, and rhetoric is by its nature antipathetic to Irony. There is, indeed, a figure of speech called 'Irony,' but this device is in practice so gross and obvious that the truly Ironical man avoids it. Tacitus avoids it too—in his case because it is not subtle enough. He prefers the epigram and the innuendo, both adapted to strike the reader, which is the end of rhetoric. He exploits to the full the meaning and the emotion of every situation, states them and perhaps a little overstates them, whereas the Ironist allows them to speak for themselves—apparently. The economy of language for which Tacitus is famous is not in his hands a method of Irony. It is a high explosive.

Historians to-day are disposed to think him prejudiced. He is not accused of manufacturing or suppressing evidence, but of placing it in a false light. On this point the student of literature has something to say. He notes two things about the Roman historians: First, they all (unless you count in Caesar, who is not in the strict sense an historian at all) are fond of moralizing; secondly, they clearly accept the orthodox Roman view that history is the half-sister of poetry. Now in Latin

literature the great vehicle for poetry of the moralizing kind was satire. One need not be surprised, therefore, if the Roman historians sometimes write like satirists—that is, like Roman satirists. There is in both the same gloomy tone, the same regret for a simpler, manlier past and condemnation of the self-indulgent present. (This does not apply so well to Horace, who had a sense of humour ; but you can see even in him what the tradition was.) Take Sallust. The real Sallust was a wealthy and luxurious person, to say no worse of him ; but he writes as if he were the Elder Cato, whom indeed he to some extent imitates in his style. Tacitus had more poetry in him than Sallust, and was in every way a better as well as a greater man. It is only natural, then, that we should find in him an even deeper gloom and sharper edge of satire. Even the humane and romantic Livy loves to contrast the present with a past which never was so splendid as his dreams of it.

This may help to account for the satire and the pessimism ; it will not account for what Irony there may be in Tacitus. Is there, then, any Irony in him at all ? I think there is a certain amount of the old *Tragic* Irony. If this be so, is it not a somewhat startling evidence of the permanence of an emotion so primitive ? At the beginning of his *Histories* he says that he will have to tell of fearful disasters to the Roman people, whereby '*it was proved that the gods care nothing for our happiness but only for our punishment*' (*adprobatum est non esse curae deis securitatem nostram, esse ultionem*).[1] How deeply Tacitus believed such a thing, I cannot discover ; but he knew its artistic value. He is not

[1] *Hist.*, i. 3.

very consistent about it; no enlightened man in the age of Trajan could believe that such a doctrine completely explained the facts of history. But then what doctrine does completely explain them? And this was the oldest doctrine of Europe, the text for a thousand sermons of disturbing power and beauty. It was always the way of ancient art to trouble the old wells of thought rather than dig new ones, whose power of healing was not proved. 'The Wrath of God upon the Roman People' was at any rate a wonderful subject, and Tacitus makes a wonderful use of it. Thucydides is greater because of his impartiality, because of that restraint which expresses the Irony of his mind. Tacitus, on the other hand, writes 'with hue like that when some great painter dips his pencil in the gloom of earthquake and eclipse.' There is exaggeration in him, but it is the exaggeration of art. It is, as it were, the apocalypse of the Tragic Irony.

XIV

a

TACITUS is a sort of waterfall over which Classical Latin literature takes a last gloomy and splendid plunge. Thereafter it changes its character, losing its force rather than its interest, until it gradually broadens out again into Latin Christianity. It would for the present, and perhaps for any, purpose be a barren task to look for Irony of the old kind after Tacitus. A new world was coming to birth. And in any case the Roman mind was too positive and rhetorical to work out new values in Irony. It was not naturally Ironical like the Greek. We must return, then, to the true fountain-head. It was what Erasmus did at the Renaissance.

I mention him here because plainly he was the master spirit in restoring to Europe the Greek thing, Irony. He had to pay for this. His contemporaries, with the almost solitary exception of his dear friend, Sir Thomas More, did not understand him ; when More died, no one at all. They admired his scholarship ; they applauded his wit ; but they really understood neither his scholarship nor his Irony. When the Lutheran Quarrel broke out, they wanted him to take sides—as if the scholar can take sides. They thought his Irony was merely a form of ridicule. They could not see that his whole value and meaning lay in a passion for moderation. It

did not seem to them—it still does not seem to most people—a possible kind of passion. But it is the essence of Hellenism. In times of violent controversy anyone who tries to get the facts quite clear is always made to suffer ; and if he is gently Ironical at the expense of the opposing partisans, they become dancing mad. This is what happened to Erasmus. He had made great game in his day of Schoolmen and monks ; and the Church, as her heart was hardened in the struggle, became suspicious of him for that. On the other side Luther could not understand why Erasmus should demur to his interpretations of Scripture ; to which, indeed, poor Erasmus could only reply that they might be very profound interpretations, but he did not see how they could be got out of the Greek. Accordingly, both parties agreed that this Erasmus was a mere pacifist.

His day may be coming yet, but I doubt that. He is too difficult for the average man to understand. Indeed, Irony of an intellectual kind can never be popular. It is the Tragic Irony that the people made and love—a feeling rather than a thought ; that, and of the Comic Irony the simpler and more obvious effects. On the other hand, upon the men who write a more intellectual form of Irony is apt to have an extraordinary power of stimulation. That was how Erasmus affected his contemporaries and immediate successors. To estimate spiritual influences is a mechanical business, and I shall not attempt it. But observe that after Erasmus appear Cervantes and Rabelais, and Irony comes again into her own. Erasmus brought her from Greece. That is not a matter of opinion but of fact.

He did not bring the Tragic Irony too. He was a

Christian scholar, and Christianity had abolished the primeval conception of God in which the Tragic Irony was rooted—had abolished it, at any rate, for the humane and rational mind of Erasmus. Besides, it was not in his nature to employ the Irony of Homer or Herodotus. He was only half a Greek, after all. He had the Greek hatred of fanaticism on the one hand and of intellectual vagueness on the other ; but what the greatest men of antiquity also had—the conviction that life is essentially (though we may make it beautifully) tragic—Erasmus did not have. He gave what he could, and he could have given nothing better for his times—if only it had been accepted.

b

But the Tragic Irony found its way into the modern world. It ran hidden because it ran deeper than any surface current of literature. The thoughts of men about life and death may change, or at least be cheered by a new hope, but life and death themselves remain, and while they remain can never fail to provide a sufficiency of Tragic matter. The problem of evil, the problem of unmerited suffering, is with us as much as with the ancients. We have dropped one answer to the Sphinx, but she has not yet cast herself from her rock. There is still on her lips that smile which we call Irony. How to interpret it is the business of philosophy, perhaps of religion. How to express it is the business of art. And this we learned from the Greeks.

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Irony.

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